YANG SU
There's Something Wrong with the Chief
DU ZHU YOU BING
1

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There's Something Wrong with the Chief
DU ZHU YOU BING
NOVEL
1

There's Something Wrong with the Chief

DU ZHU YOU BING

NOVEL

1

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THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE CHIEF: DU ZHU YOU BING (NOVEL) VOL. 1

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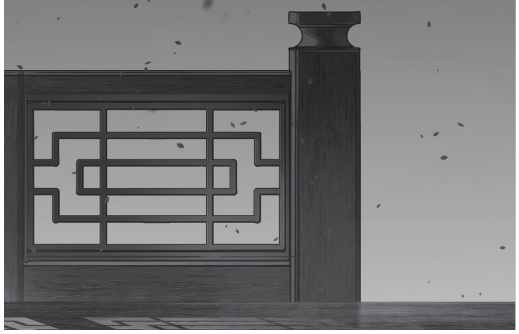

Chapter 1:
The Coolness of Fresh Rain

A FRESH RAIN had just fallen, leaving the stone path wet. The trafficker ordered the children to squat beneath the eaves, where they waited for the matron to fetch them. Occasionally scraping the mud from his feet, Xiahou Lian stood among them. Strapped securely to his ankle was a dagger for self-defense, a gift from Uncle Duan before Xiahou Lian had left home.

Xiahou Lian was handsome, particularly his eyes, which were as striking as his mother's; they shone like stars in the night sky, sparkling and luminous. Many young girls had tried to engage him in conversation on the journey here, but he'd ignored them. In his eyes, he was different from the shortsighted girls who thought that being sold into the Xie household would mean food to eat and clothes to wear. Those with a bit of ambition even dreamed of climbing into the lord's bed. Not Xiahou Lian, Qiye Garden's youngest assassin. He wasn't here to be a servant—he was here to kill.

With his chin propped nonchalantly on his hand, Xiahou Lian swept his gaze around the alley. It was early morning, and the area was quiet and deserted but for a couple of beggars squatting at the entrance, heads bobbing as they dozed. At least one of those beggars had to be connected to Qiye Garden. Once Xiahou Lian successfully infiltrated the Xie household, he would find a note tossed over the wall naming his target. Someone might even sneak to his window in the middle of the night to reveal the Garden's mole. Although he'd never before taken part in any assassination mission for Qiye Garden, his mother often told him bedtime stories of Garden assassins blending into the streets, then striking without warning, elusive as night.

The trafficker came closer to count the children. Xiahou Lian kept his eyes lowered and held his breath, squatting obediently. That was how an assassin should be: forever inconspicuous.

Two matrons and several young maidservants opened the door and stepped out. The trafficker flashed a smile and approached them. "They're

all here—good, nimble children. Just five copper coins a child—the best price in Jinling."

The head matron instructed the children to stand at attention, inspecting each for deformities, and for missing limbs, eyes, and noses. After a brief negotiation with the trafficker, she ushered the children into the Xie household.

Xiahou Lian had sharp ears. He heard the trafficker weigh the silver in his hand, then grate, "Penniless paupers!"

The matrons' and maids' coats showed signs of fraying. A woman in the very back even wore a coat sporting a conspicuous patch. Only the head matron wore slightly better garments, a jade bracelet adorning her wrist.

"Hey, you in the gray coat. Come here," a voice suddenly called out. Xiahou Lian looked up to see the head matron gesturing at him.

He walked over, and the matron shoved him toward the woman in the patched coat. "This child looks bright enough. Take him to your place. Let no one claim that the mistress neglects the third young master."

"Matron Liu, could we have one more child?" the woman pleaded. Her face was gaunt, and her mouth bore deep wrinkles, resembling a walnut soaked too long in water. "The mistress sent away two of our maids, and now all the courtyard has left is me and one young girl. It's not enough to manage."

The matron snorted coldly. "The third young master is just one little child. How many servants could he need? Should we send the entire estate to look after his whims? The Xie household is vast, and every corner requires attention. We've purchased only a few children, so be grateful you're getting one. You dare to ask for more?"

"I wouldn't dream of it! Please don't be upset, Matron Liu. One is more than enough." The woman quickly bowed in apology and grabbed Xiahou Lian's hand to take her leave.

Her callouses scraped Xiahou Lian's palm, but he was used to that discomfort. His mother's hands, worn from years of wielding a blade, were even rougher.

"You can call me Aunt Lan. What's your name?"

“Xiahou Lian,” he replied timidly, assuming the expression of a well-behaved child.

“‘Lian,’ as in what?”

“As in, ‘Amid the vast green wilderness, a shadow falls between the rippling waves.’”[1]

Aunt Lan looked at Xiahou Lian in surprise. “You know poetry?”

Xiahou Lian was caught off guard. He’d forgotten that trafficked children came from poor families; they probably couldn’t even recognize written characters, let alone recite poetry. He quickly followed up with a lie. “I heard someone say it once. It’s the only line I know.”

Aunt Lan smiled. “It’s good to know poetry. Our young master Jinglan loves to read. If you can recite a few lines, you’re sure to win his favor. Can you read? Have you studied before? The *Hundred Family Surnames*, the *Thousand Character Classic*—have you read those?”

If erotic albums and saber manuals counted as reading... “I’ve read a bit. I can write my name.”

Aunt Lan gently patted Xiahou Lian’s hand, her smile warm. “That’s amazing already. I can only read a few numbers myself.”

As they traveled, they encountered numerous other maids and servants. Aunt Lan always paused at a distance to greet them or swerved to avoid them altogether. To Xiahou Lian’s confusion, however, the other maids and servants seemed to ignore Aunt Lan entirely.

Ahead, two young maids chatted. “I heard our lord is returning to the estate tomorrow. The mistress is overjoyed! Today, we’ll need to quickly tidy the lord’s room.”

Aunt Lan greeted the maids as she and Xiahou Lian passed by.

“What’s the mistress so happy about?” one was asking. “I heard the lord got sent back because he offended the palace’s Wei-gonggong. We should be careful in case disaster comes knocking!”

“Really, why would the lord go out of his way to offend Wei-gong-gong?” the other maid responded. “That’s just asking for trouble.”

As their voices faded, Xiahou Lian lowered his head and continued walking. Eventually, a round-faced maidservant who looked around thirteen or fourteen years old approached to greet them. “Auntie! I came out to meet you. Hey, how come you only brought back one little boy?”

“Come here, Xiao-Lian. This is Lianxiang-jiejie,” Aunt Lan said.

“Hello, Lianxiang-jiejie,” Xiahou Lian greeted her obediently.

Lianxiang shot Xiahou Lian a dissatisfied glance. “What can one little boy do to help? We’ll have to look after *him*. The first wife is being unreasonable! She expects us to handle cleaning, laundry, and weeding every day. Must we learn to duplicate ourselves?”

Aunt Lan stopped Lianxiang, shaking her head. “That’s enough. The three of us will be more than adequate to serve our young master. Why are you here? How could you leave the shaoye alone in the house?”

“It’s fine. He’s taking a nap.”

Aunt Lan seemed to remain anxious, and the three quickened their pace. The walk to Qiuwu Courtyard passed through what seemed like the entire estate, and their surroundings grew increasingly rundown with each step. Finally, they caught sight of the corner gate leading into Qiuwu Courtyard. Just before they entered, a boy’s shout and the loud crash of pots and pans from within greeted them.

“Give me back my book! Give it back!”

Aunt Lan and Lianxiang rushed into the courtyard with Xiahou Lian following close behind. A small, messy area unfolded before him. Inside, several servants had pinned a half-grown boy to the ground. The boy’s clothes were muddy and torn. Beside the group stood a second boy with a chubby face, large ears, and pale skin. His nose and ears were as round, shiny, and plump as meatballs. Everyone else Xiahou Lian had seen since arriving at the estate was scrawny and thin; it was as if all their missing weight was amassed in this one boy.

Like many wealthy youths of the time, the plump boy—clearly conscious of his appearance—wore powder and greasepaint, though he’d gone a bit overboard with them. The overwhelming scent of powder engulfed Xiahou Lian as he approached, making his head spin.

“What do you mean, ‘give it back’? The book is mine to begin with! It’s still mine even if I tire of it and throw it away. Who gave you the right to pick it up and read it, you mutt?” The fat boy ripped the book in his hands to shreds, sneering. “You pathetic piece of trash. You think you can read? What—are you hoping to take the imperial exams? Dream on, you son of a whore maid. You’ll be a servant for the rest of your life!”

The other boy roared and thrashed. His face was flushed crimson, eyes bloodshot. “I’ll kill you! *I’ll kill you!* How dare you say that about my mother?!”

Lianxiang and Aunt Lan knelt on the ground, knocking their heads against it. “Da-shaoye, please let San-shaoye go!” they cried. “Please let him go!”

“Get out of my way! Quick, men, check to see if he’s hidden any more of my books! Tear everything apart! Leave no stone unturned!”

The servants complied, ransacking the entire courtyard. They even tore apart the straw paper in the latrine. Soon, a heap of shredded paper formed in the open yard. There were barely any books to be found; even combined with the latrine paper, they made only a meager pile.

The third young master stared blankly at the mound of shredded paper, then slowly lifted his gaze to stare coldly at the fat boy. “If I ever rise to power, I swear I’ll ki—”

Before he finished the word, a servant kicked him to the ground and laughed. “You think you’ll ever hold power? You’re destined to spend your worthless life wallowing in the mud! Nothing is going to change that!”

Squatting by the wall, Xiahou Lian seethed with fury. His hand instinctively reached for the dagger tucked in his boot, then paused. *No,* he thought. *An assassin must not reveal himself.* Taking a deep breath, he forced his hand away and quietly shrank back, harmless as a quail.

The fat boy crouched in front of the third young master and scooped a handful of paper from the ground. He grabbed the other boy’s face in his left hand and shoved the scraps into his mouth. The third young master struggled fiercely, but the servants held him down, laughing as choking coughs racked his body. Lianxiang and Aunt Lan tried to rush over, but the

other servants stopped them, forcing them to watch as he sprawled on the ground.

“Listen here, Xie Jinglan. Your whore of a mother took advantage of my father while he was drunk—that’s how you came to be. A lowly mutt like you, dreaming of reading and becoming an official? Give it up. My mother only allows you the title of ‘shaoye’ out of kindness. Keep stepping out of line, and I’ll kick you and your doddery maid out to scrub chamber pots for a living.”

The fat boy tossed a handful of paper scraps into the air. They fell like snow, cloaking Xie Jinglan’s face. Then the entire group walked away, roaring with laughter. Aunt Lan and Lianxiang helped Xie Jinglan to his feet and brushed the dirt from his clothing, their eyes brimming with tears.

“How can Da-shaoye be so awful to San-shaoye? He threw away those books; our San-shaoye merely salvaged them from the storeroom. Yet Da-shaoye tore them to shreds!” Lianxiang exclaimed indignantly. Noticing Xie Jinglan’s silence and pursed lips, she softened her tone. “San-shaoye… maybe you should give up on reading. Ugh. No paper, no ink, and now no books. Let it go.”

Xie Jinglan ignored her, but he stood up to stop Aunt Lan when she grabbed a broom to sweep the scraps away. “Don’t. Bring them inside. I can reassemble them.”

“But they’re in shreds and all from different books. Can you really put them back together?”

“I can. Leave them and let me.”

“Ah, right. The child I brought back today can read, so he can help you, Shaoye. Xiao-Lian, where are you? Come greet the young master.”

Upon hearing this, Xiahou Lian hurried over and bowed awkwardly before Xie Jinglan. When he came close, he finally got a good look at the young master. Even the dirt smudged over his face could not conceal the beauty of his features. His gaze resembled a serene autumn lake, but his complexion was pale and sickly, as if he wasn’t eating well.

So, he’s girly. No wonder he’d lacked the power to fight back. All the men in Qiye Garden had bodies as robust as steel. When they undressed, they revealed solid muscles honed by years of training. Xiahou Lian had

spent years on the mountain, surrounded by battle-hardened warriors who'd clawed their way back from the jaws of death; he'd never seen a young master so frail and weak. A flicker of disdain sparked inside him.

Xie Jinglan lifted his eyes to glance at Xiahou Lian. The latter's hair was disheveled, his face caked with brown and black streaks—he looked like a mud-covered monkey. Xie Jinglan couldn't help but frown. "Who's that? I don't want him. Send him back."

Xiahou Lian said nothing.

Chapter 2:
Exploring the Library

ALTHOUGH XIE JINGLAN might have been a young master in name only, he was arrogant by nature. He wholeheartedly believed that he would one day crush the main courtyard's young master beneath his heel; it was only a matter of time. As soon as he rode his horse through the streets after conquering the imperial examinations, members of the Xie family would kneel before him, weeping and begging for his forgiveness.

When he was abused, he choked down his mouthfuls of blood and broken teeth and envisioned the glorious future that lay ahead. His anger unappeased, the teeth and blood roiled inside him, sparking a slew of twisted daydreams. It was not Mencius's teachings of "conquering others with virtue"[2] that filled his head but the words of Sima Qian: "A gentleman does not fear serving his revenge ten years cold."[3]

If Xie Jinglan wished to stand above all others, the imperial exams were his only option. The Xie family descended from a long line of scholars; the family had served as officials for generations. Alas, the family's talents had waned by the time the current patriarch, Xie Bingfeng, took over. Despite a lifetime of tireless effort, Xie Bingfeng rose only to the sixth rank within the Censorate. Nevertheless, he followed the teachings of the esteemed Confucian scholar Dai Shengyan, serving as an honest, upright official whose extensive knowledge and integrity earned him a commendable reputation.

In the current dynasty, a person's character was thoroughly scrutinized; reputation alone could keep one fed. Xie Bingfeng possessed no practical skills yet still managed to become a leader among scholars; the literati and Confucians took pride in associating with the Xie family. Since the family had been scholars throughout the generations, upholding that ancestral scholastic tradition was paramount. Thus, the Xie family prioritized the education of their descendants, enlisting their most esteemed scholars to manage the clan's school.

The first wife’s son, however, was a fool beyond saving. Fearing that Xie Jinglan would overshadow him, Lady Xiao forbade Xie Jinglan to attend the clan’s school and refused to provide him with writing materials. Left with no other option, Xie Jinglan resorted to scavenging in the storeroom for old books that had been used by the eldest young master, Xie Jingtao. He hid in corners to eavesdrop on the clan teachers’ lessons, writing in the dirt with twigs. Despite the clumsiness of his efforts, he managed to grasp most of the Four Books and Five Classics, surpassing even the classroom’s most earnest students.

Ignoring Xiahou Lian, Xie Jinglan sat at a table, meticulously picking through the heap of paper scraps. Slowly, he began to glue the shreds back together.

These books weren’t tomes of mystical wisdom, merely his stepping stones. Only through these banal, inane precepts could Xie Jinglan climb above all others.

Just looking at the scraps, Xiahou Lian felt his head spin. He picked up a few at random; while he recognized the characters, the contents eluded him entirely. Aunt Lan had asked him to help, but all he could do was stand there and stare.

The sun set, and night descended. There were no oil lamps to illuminate the room, just a few flickering candles. Xie Jinglan refused to place any of those on the table for fear they’d ignite the scattered paper. Struggling in the dim light, he continued to glue the pages together. The boys’ shadows loomed long against the walls of the rundown room, like two shades adrift in the darkness.

Xiahou Lian eventually dozed off at the table, only to wake and see Xie Jinglan still diligently gluing away.

Xie Jinglan was frail, and although they were the same age—twelve—Xiahou Lian was robust, whereas Xie Jinglan looked as if a mere wind could blow him away. After such a long task, Xie Jinglan’s eyes had grown weary. The boy kept rubbing them, arousing a flicker of sympathy in even the insensitive Xiahou Lian.

A mischievous slacker, Xiahou Lian never practiced swordplay for more than four hours at a time. In the mountains, he’d spent seven out of

every ten days chasing rabbits and pheasants, dedicating only the remaining three to memorizing and practicing saber techniques.

He picked up a scrap Xie Jinglan had discarded. It was covered in poorly handwritten words, the ink lines varying in thickness and blemished by a number of unnecessary strokes. The writer's brush had apparently been of poor quality, coarse and scraggly. Glancing around, Xiahou Lian spotted a thinning brush on the ground, its sparse bristles still stained with ink.

Not bad for someone so girly. Xiahou Lian might've been lazy, but he genuinely respected those willing to toil.

"Hey, um, Shaoye," Xiahou Lian blurted awkwardly, scratching his head. Being a hoodlum, he still wasn't used to playing a servant. "It's getting late," he continued. "If you're tired, why not go to bed?"

Without even glancing at him, Xie Jinglan replied, "Just go to sleep if you want. You're useless here anyway."

The little bastard might not have mastered all the classics, but he'd sure learned how to tick people off. Xiahou Lian, however, was good-natured and didn't hold it against him. Instead, he said, "At this rate, you'll be stuck gluing paper until next year. Tomorrow, I'll steal you a book from the library. I've heard that the Xie family's Xiuwen Hall houses a huge collection of books; the family even prints their own volumes. Their copies are reputedly the finest you'll find in all of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, with wide margins and large characters so they're effortless to read. Why waste your time here when better books are practically right in front of you?"

Xie Jinglan finally lifted his head from the stack of paper. "*Steal*? What kind of life did you lead before coming here? Don't bring underhanded tricks you picked up elsewhere into this household. If you got caught, you'd drag us all down."

"Fine—since you're so high and mighty, just keep on gluing," Xiahou Lian said, feeling snubbed. He rose from the table and walked away. "It'd just be a couple dumb books. Yet here you are, a young master of the Xie family, cowering like a turtle and gluing paper scraps, too scared to take what belongs to you. If that fat kid finds out, he'll sure laugh his head off."

"Wait." Xie Jinglan glared at Xiahou Lian, sneering.

“What?”

“You have no right to mock me, no matter how low I’ve fallen.” Xie Jinglan stood, seizing Xiahou Lian by the collar, and spat, “You’re my servant. I don’t need you lecturing me!”

“Give me a break,” Xiahou Lian said, shoving Xie Jinglan aside. “You’re worse off than even a servant right now. ‘Young master,’ my ass.”

Xie Jinglan suddenly sprang forward and punched Xiahou Lian. His hard, craggy fist—little more than a bag of skin and bones—caught the other boy off guard and struck him squarely in the face. A fresh bruise bloomed instantly, accompanied by prickling pain. Furious, Xiahou Lian swung his fists without another word. The frail, weak Xie Jinglan was no match for him. After they’d exchanged a few blows, Xie Jinglan found himself pinned beneath Xiahou Lian, unable to get away no matter how hard he struggled.

“Do you yield? With that physique, you’d be too little to eat for lunch—and you still picked a fight?!” Xiahou Lian smirked, patting Xie Jinglan’s face triumphantly. “Look at you, trying to take things out on me when you couldn’t even beat that fatso. I may be your servant, but that doesn’t mean I’m yours to kick around!”

Xie Jinglan struggled for a long time to no avail. At last, he slumped to the ground and stared up at the holey ceiling. As a wave of sadness and humiliation washed over him, tears suddenly filled his eyes. He covered them frantically with his hands, gritting his teeth and forcing himself to remain silent. He hadn’t shed a tear during Xie Jingtao’s daytime beating, but now his sorrow flowed out, impossible to stop.

“Why are you crying? Hey, don’t cry!” Xiahou Lian said, flustered. He quickly got off Xie Jinglan and helped him up. “I only hit you a few times! Don’t cry!”

“I’m not crying!” Xie Jinglan turned his head away, refusing to let Xiahou Lian see how red his eyes were.

Xiahou Lian had always known that he was afraid of girls crying, but he’d never expected to find a boy’s tears equally unbearable. With a heavy sigh, he relented. “All right, all right. I’m sorry.”

“Get lost! I don’t want to see you!”

“Hey, don’t be like that! I’m apologizing. I was wrong. I shouldn’t have been so rude.”

Xie Jinglan remained silent, which left Xiahou Lian with no choice but to sit there scratching his head. After a while, the latter said, “I’m heading to bed now, so please stop crying.”

Xie Jinglan turned his head away, unwilling to look at him, and Xiahou Lian could only stand and walk away.

It was finally quiet. The candles had flickered out at some point, leaving a fog of darkness that crowded in on Xie Jinglan from all sides. He sat alone on the ground, and tears came again. Once his eyes had adjusted to the dark, he propped himself against a stool and tried to stand. The stool had one short leg; it wobbled precariously, and he nearly lost his balance.

Pushing the door open, he walked out into the lonely courtyard. It was strewn with fallen leaves, and the lotus flowers in the two planters had long since withered, leaving only pale stalks behind.

Twelve years of bitterness surged within his heart. Everyone had a mother except him. Although he had a father, he might as well not have had one. Growing up alone in this isolated courtyard, he’d been like a ball of rice anyone could mold as they pleased. Now, even his servant looked down on him.

He laughed derisively as Xiahou Lian’s words echoed in his mind: *“It’d just be a couple dumb books. Yet here you are, a young master of the Xie family, cowering like a turtle and gluing paper scraps, too scared to take what belongs to you. If that fat kid finds out, he’ll sure laugh his head off.”*

Xiahou Lian was right. Those books were *his*. Xie Jinglan paused for a moment, letting the wind dry his wet cheeks, then clenched his fists and strode through the side gate.

All was deserted and eerily silent. In her scrimping, the first matron had extinguished even the lanterns in the walkways. It was the depths of winter, and the biting night wind stung Xie Jinglan’s face. The path to the library was shrouded in complete darkness, but Xie Jinglan recalled the route and crept forward.

After walking for a while, he arrived at the library, only to find the door locked. Having no key, he couldn’t get in. Instead, he circled the building, seeking a way to sneak in, but found all the doors and windows securely shut.

Xie Jinglan stood before the locked door for a while, now numb from the biting wind, then snapped out of his daze. Feeling as if he’d awoken from a dream, he turned to leave. Just as he did, a boy stepped from behind a pillar, smiling brightly at him.

Xie Jinglan stubbornly looked away, refusing to meet the bastard’s gaze. “Why did you follow me? To watch me make a fool of myself?”

“How could my humble self dare?”

Xiahou Lian pulled a thin iron wire from his sleeve and deftly slid it into and around the keyhole. With a crisp click, the lock unlatched, and the door creaked open an inch. Xiahou Lian pushed it open wider and gestured for Xie Jinglan to enter. Xie Jinglan hesitated, biting his lip, but ultimately still stepped inside.

Xiahou Lian gently closed the door behind him. “Quick—which book do you want? Grab it!”

Xie Jinglan was silent as he stared into the pitch-black room. *How am I supposed to find a book in this darkness?* he thought.

Meanwhile, Xiahou Lian produced a firestarter and blew gently. A small flame flickered to life at his fingertips and illuminated their faces. They looked at each other, a mere arm’s length apart, the glow from the tiny fire shining between them.

Xiahou Lian had tidied himself up. His face was clean, and his eyes shone like stars. His appearance was just pleasing enough to curb Xie Jinglan’s displeasure somewhat. However, the recollection of Xiahou Lian pinning him down and punching him still weighed on his mind. Xie Jinglan wrestled with his discomfort for a while, then decided to ignore the other boy.

Noticing that Xie Jinglan was still sulking, Xiahou Lian grew a little worried. “You’re not still upset, are you?” he asked. “Please, Shaoye, show me some kindness. Please don’t be mad. Look at me, your humble servant,

bowing before you and begging for your grace. Won't you please forgive me just this once?"

"Who's angry with you?" Xie Jinglan huffed, grabbing the firestarter as he turned to search for the book. "Hmph. I've never met a servant as insolent as you. You're lucky that I'm your master. Xie Jingtao would've killed you eight hundred times over by now!"

"Of course, Jinglan-shaoye! I'm truly fortunate to have such a kindhearted master. You have been gracious with my undeserving self, and you're willing to overlook my mistakes."

Xiahou Lian was an old hand at sweet-talking others. Xie Jinglan, appeased, softened his expression.

The library was packed with bookshelves, leaving just enough room for two people to squeeze through. The shelves loomed overhead, almost brushing the ceiling. A musty odor permeated the room, and a slight chill in the air made Xiahou Lian uneasy. He nudged Xie Jinglan's back, urging him to hurry up.

Passing three bookshelves, Xie Jinglan realized that the library was organized according to the Seven Categories.[4] For what felt like an eternity, the pair searched with rapt focus, then finally located Chen Hao's *Collected Explanations of the "Book of Rites"* on the seventeenth shelf. Xie Jinglan decided to take only the first volume, planning to read it, then return for the second.

"Do you think they'll notice that the book is missing?" Xie Jinglan whispered.

"Notice? No frigging way! Can't you see the dust on these books? They haven't been touched in centuries!"

"Watch your language!" Xie Jinglan lightly swatted Xiahou Lian's head, then reached for another volume. "I'll take this one too."

Xiahou Lian lifted the first volume and casually flipped through it. His eyes went wide.

"What's wrong?" Xie Jinglan asked, noting Xiahou Lian's odd reaction. He leaned in for a closer look and was instantly dumbstruck.

The book was full of lifelike, captivating erotic paintings. Men and women lay entwined in various poses, and even their expressions were rendered in exquisite detail.

“Wh-what is this?” Xie Jinglan stammered, his face flushed with embarrassment and hot enough to cook an egg. He slammed the book shut.

“Erotic artwork!” Xiahou Lian exclaimed in awe. “If I’m not mistaken, this is the famous *Intimate Scenes of Leisurely Love* by Yuan-dynasty painter Zhao Xiyan. My mother has a replica! Could this be the original? The beautifully drawn people, the rich colors, even the patterns on the clothes and the flowers and plants are lovingly detailed—it’s the pinnacle of erotic painting! Look—this one’s called *Red Plum Hanging Down*, and this one is *Warbler Singing at Dawn*. This one is *Summer in Jiangnan*.”

Xie Jinglan listened to Xiahou Lian’s lengthy explanation, then leapt on the least immediately relevant part: “Wait—did you say ‘my mother’?”

Xiahou Lian jolted, realizing that he’d slipped up. “No—no, I was saying that your father’s a hypocrite, hiding erotic artwork in his library!”

Xie Jinglan’s face flushed an even deeper red. He frantically shoved the album of erotic illustrations back onto the shelf and stammered, “I’m not taking this. I’ll grab something else.”

“Wait.” Xiahou Lian pulled down the album and tucked it into his shirt, lips curved in a mischievous smile. “Let’s bring it back to study. There’s a...certain charm to reading these at night, by lamplight. You’ve never seen anything like this, have you, Jinglan-shaoye? Aren’t you curious?”

Xie Jinglan firmly refused. “Put it back!”

Xiahou Lian chuckled. “Didn’t expect you to be such a goody two-shoes. Fine, don’t read it. But I’m still keeping it for now, since it might come in handy.”

Next, Xiahou Lian insisted that Xie Jinglan show him to the fat boy’s study. Although Xie Jinglan had no idea what he was planning, he agreed to bring him there, unable to take Xiahou Lian’s relentless badgering. The pair crept into the main courtyard. There, Xiahou Lian deftly used his wire once more to unlock the study door, and they slipped inside.

Xie Jinglan's heart was in his throat. This was his first taste of thievery, but when he saw Xiahou Lian's unshakable confidence, he refused to be outdone. He summoned his courage and feigned nonchalance, then followed closely behind Xiahou Lian, scanning the study and taking in the furnishings.

In the center of the study hung a plaque inscribed *House of Sweeping Leaves*. Xie Jinglan scoffed. Someone like Xie Jingtao just dragged down such an elegant name.

On the table sat an inkstone, brushes, and high-quality rice paper from Jing County in Anhui. Xie Jinglan caressed the smooth, silky sheets, and a twinge of envy stirred within him.

Xiahou Lian found a stack of books on the table and pulled out *Collected Explanations of the* "*Book of Rites*." Sure enough, its cover was identical to the one he'd taken from the library; both had been printed by the Xie family's Xiuwen Hall. Taking the genuine volume, he placed the counterfeit on top of the pile of books, then signaled Xie Jinglan to follow him.

Xie Jinglan quickly caught on to Xiahou Lian's scheme.

Xiahou Lian shook his head and smiled. "On my way here today, I overheard a maid saying that the lord is returning tomorrow. If your hypocritical father values his children's education above all else, guess what he's sure to do upon getting back?"

Xie Jinglan felt a surge of warmth in his chest. "You always have inane ideas. This might not even work," he said, refusing to betray his gratitude.

Xiahou Lian just grinned. "Let's wait and see, then."

Chapter 3:
A Face Like Jade

THE UNFAMILIAR BED made a restful night's sleep impossible. When dawn finally broke, Xiahou Lian rose and pushed open the door, noticing that Xie Jinglan's house was already lit. He carried a cup of tea into the study to find Xie Jinglan at the table, book in hand. The candle beside him had melted nearly to its base.

This kid couldn't have read all night without a wink of sleep, could he?

Xiahou Lian had guessed correctly: Xie Jinglan had indeed stayed up all night. The books he'd previously scavenged had had pages missing, or torn corners, or they'd been filled with Xie Jingtao's nonsensical scribbles. This was different. Xie Jinglan had never before gotten his hands on a volume of such quality. He'd spent the entire night absorbed in it, savoring what he could comprehend and memorizing what he could not. By morning, he'd managed to get through over half of the text. Thirsty as a parched man encountering a long-awaited rain, he yearned to imbibe the entire book in one gulp.

To avoid disturbing him, Xiahou Lian quietly left the room. He grabbed a tray from the kitchen and wandered through the residence, pretending to be a servant at his chores.

A skilled assassin's most important task was to become thoroughly familiar with the terrain, nailing down the best routes for both the assassination and their escape.

When he was young, Xiahou Lian had followed his mother down the mountain, chasing her while surveying his surroundings. Although Qiye Garden could have provided maps, his mother traversed every street, ditch, well, and hidden cellar on foot.

It took Xiahou Lian some time to locate the outer wall of the sprawling Xie property. The area was deserted. Seizing his chance, he vaulted over the wall. As soon as he landed, a large hand clamped over his

mouth and lifted him clean off the ground. When Xiahou Lian turned to see who'd grabbed him, he recognized Uncle Duan, whom he hadn't seen in ages. Excitement rushed through Xiahou Lian; his uncle must've come to give him his mission.

"Hey, kid. Did they punish you in there? Look at you, you little monkey! Even as a servant, you can't sit still—always climbing around." Uncle Duan set him down and handed him a few steamed buns, then lit a pipe for himself. He blew out a few swirling rings of smoke.

"Tell me who I'm supposed to kill, Uncle. Quickly! I promise I'll do it swiftly and flawlessly!"

"You really think you're ready to kill someone? You'd be lucky to survive! Stay inside, and don't cause me any trouble. I have work to do. I'm heading to North Zhili. Your mother went to the Western Regions and won't be back for another six months. Stay here and be good. If you find yourself in trouble, just seek out the manor's elderly firewood collector," Uncle Duan urged, pressing a few silver coins into Xiahou Lian's hand.

When Xiahou Lian's mind caught up to his uncle's words, he was furious. "No way! You promised that if I succeeded this time, you'd give me my plaque, didn't you?! You're just leaving me hanging so I won't get in your way!"

"Your plaque? Do you think we're running a brothel? And do you really think a plaque would mean success? With your skills, you'd end up dead meat before you even got near the target." Uncle Duan poked his forehead. "Listen, kid. This is for your own good. You don't really think this line of work is easy, do you?"

"I'm going to be a mighty assassin like my mother! Somebody who makes everyone tremble with fear!"

Uncle Duan shook his head, gazing at Xiahou Lian for a long moment before sighing deeply. "You're old enough now. It's time I share some hard truths with you. Know what your mother is really up to right now?"

"She's assassinating the Chakravarti of the Western Regions. I know all about it; I've seen the files on him. He's really underhanded, skilled with

traps and poisons, and he has godlike talent with the machete. So? Against my mother, he's a dead man all the same."

"Then did you know that two assassins from Qiye Garden have already died at his hands? The Western Regions are remote, the sandstorms treacherous. That area isn't like the Central Plains. Skilled as your mother is with a saber, going there is still a threat to her life." The typically lighthearted Uncle Duan's serious expression made Xiahou Lian uneasy. "Assassins live on borrowed time; we often pay for the lives we take with our own. Tell me, have you ever seen an assassin over the age of forty in Qiye Garden? It's not that we don't allow older members, it's that no one survives to that age!"

"B-bullshit! My mother's different. She earned the position of Garuda by the time she was twenty! The leader of the Jindao Sect and the inheritor of the Blizzard Saber technique in the north—both were terrors of the jianghu, and they still lost their heads to my mother!"

"Fine, fine. Your mother is the best—I won't argue with you there. Just keep your own limitations in mind. Your blade can handle pheasants and rabbits just fine. Maybe it could even hold its own against tigers and leopards. But assassination? That's still beyond you. You won't survive in the field with your current skills, and your mother entrusted me with your safety. If you throw your life away, don't expect me to burn money at your funeral!"

With that, Uncle Duan donned a straw hat and picked up a rack of goods he'd propped against the wall. In an instant, he'd transformed into a traveling merchant. It was impossible to tell that he was a ruthless assassin of the jianghu.

As Uncle Duan walked away, Xiahou Lian watched his retreating back, his broad shoulders and strapping build. The coarse fabric of his uncle's shirt did little to conceal his ropey muscles. When Uncle Duan wielded a saber, he transformed into a formidable assassin of Qiye Garden. He'd once pursued a then-Chief Grand Secretary across thousands of miles to an inn. The Embroidered Uniform Guard had surrounded the building, creating an ironclad enclosure. Yet, the next morning, an attendant opened the door to find a headless corpse. No one knew how Uncle Duan had infiltrated the inn and claimed the Chief Grand Secretary's head.

Every assassin had their own tale, yet they all shared the same fate—an untimely death and a burial in the wilderness.

Uncle Duan walked along the cobblestones, carrying the rack of goods, one calloused big toe poking from a hole in his straw shoes. Watching him, Xiahou Lian was inexplicably struck by a subtle sense of desolation.

Clutching the silver in his pocket, Xiahou Lian kicked a pebble at his feet as he made his way to Longfu Temple Street in the western suburbs. There, he purchased ink, paper, and brushes. He'd never been one to save money—the silver Uncle Duan had just given him slipped through his fingers like water. Soon, he was left with only a handful of copper coins.

On his way back, Xiahou Lian noticed carriages parked in front of the Xie residence, which suggested that the lord had returned. Heading back to Qiuwu Courtyard, Xiahou Lian handed the ink, paper, and brushes to Xie Jinglan.

Xie Jinglan stared at him in surprise, momentarily speechless. Brimming with glee, Xiahou Lian awaited the boy's tears of gratitude. To his shock, however, Xie Jinglan grabbed his hand and snapped, "Where did you steal these from? You need to break this terrible habit!"

Xiahou Lian was ready to retort, "How do you know I stole them?" But he stopped. A complete set of ink, paper, and brushes was pricey. If he claimed that he'd bought them, he'd also have to explain where the money had come from. Defeated, he replied, "Fine, I stole them. So what?"

"You—" Xie Jinglan was so furious, he didn't know what else to say.

Xiahou Lian rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, I didn't get caught. These won't be traced to you. Just relax and use them."

Xie Jinglan grew even angrier. After Xiahou Lian had risked everything to help him steal those books the day before, he subconsciously started to see the other boy as one of his own. He wasn't worried about the potential repercussions for *himself*; he feared that Xiahou Lian would get caught and have his hands broken. It hadn't even occurred to Xie Jinglan that Xiahou Lian might be brash enough to sneak out of the residence—he assumed the boy had pilfered the writing tools from within. The mistress

was a noxious, callous woman, greedy and miserly. If she caught him, a beating was certain.

But Xie Jinglan had a difficult temperament; he always put on a tough facade, refusing to show any vulnerability. “That’s right!” he snapped. “I *am* worried that they’ll trace these back to us! Life in the manor is hard enough already. If this becomes another mess, good luck cleaning it up! I refuse to use these things. Make sure this doesn’t happen again!”

With that, Xie Jinglan packed away the ink and writing tools and stashed them at the bottom of the cabinet, determined to leave them there to gather dust. Xiahou Lian’s good intentions had gone unappreciated—now he mourned his lost silver and felt miserable to boot. He stormed off to the courtyard to do his chores, and both boys ignored each other until, suddenly, Lianxiang burst into the courtyard with a joyful shout.

“Shaoye! Shaoye! I have good news!”

“What good news?”

“The lord was just in the study, reviewing Da-shaoye’s homework. You’ll never guess what he found!”

There was no need to guess; he’d discovered the album of erotica that Xiahou Lian had left on Xie Jingtao’s desk.

Lianxiang didn’t wait for her master’s response. “You won’t believe it! The lord actually found erotic artwork hidden inside Da-shaoye’s copy of the *Book of Rites*! He was so furious, he grabbed a whip himself and flogged Da-shaoye until he was a blubbering mess. Even the mistress couldn’t stop him! Ha ha ha! Da-shaoye won’t bother us for a while now. He probably can’t even get out of bed. I heard the lord whipped him for half an hour!”

Xie Jinglan fell silent, then pushed open the window and spotted Xiahou Lian washing clothes by the well. He hesitated, agonizing over whether to go to him and apologize. As he struggled, Xiahou Lian whipped his head around and held up a pair of underpants. He shot Xie Jinglan an impish grin.

Spotting the familiar underwear, Xie Jinglan quickly looked away. He opened the cabinet, only to find that the underpants he’d hidden inside were missing. Aunt Lan must’ve taken them.

Xiahou Lian's teasing voice rang out. "Jinglan-shaoye, did you wet yourself last night?"

"You shut up!" Xie Jinglan slammed the window shut.

Xie Jinglan ignored the other boy for three full days, but Xiahou Lian remained unfazed. He kept to his business, even taking the time to rifle through all the birds' nests around Qiuwu Courtyard.

He was quite entertained that Xie Jinglan was a hypocrite. *Look at him! Just a few fleeting glances at some erotic artwork left him that flustered*. Xiahou Lian tucked that little secret safely away in his heart; he'd pull it out to amuse himself whenever Xie Jinglan threw a tantrum. That thought, combined with Xiahou Lian's naturally carefree disposition, would make dealing with Xie Jinglan's ill temper fairly easy.

Xiahou Lian was confident he understood Xie Jinglan's personality perfectly. The guy had the temperament of a spoiled young lady; he couldn't be indulged. The more that happened, the more of a pampered headache he'd become.

For instance, Xie Jinglan was disturbingly obsessed with cleanliness. His clothes had to be laundered until they were utterly spotless, free of even the slightest stain. His dishes had to be scrubbed until they were perfect mirrors. Everything had to be washed and rewashed four or five times—at least.

Second, Xie Jinglan was a constant busybody, always criticizing Xiahou Lian for chewing with his mouth open, or complaining that he hadn't washed his hands before eating or rinsed his mouth after. Xiahou Lian was used to his own devil-may-care former lifestyle. He'd suffered no such constraints on his manners during his time in the mountains. Furthermore, he was a *man*. He didn't feel that men should concern themselves with trivialities nor fret over tidiness or hygiene. To Xiahou Lian, that was all just nagging and nitpicking, and he couldn't understand Xie Jinglan's pursuit of a gentleman's noble demeanor. Xiahou Lian felt that the other boy simply poked his nose into everything—he seemed to be a meddler through and through.

Alas, Xiahou Lian was only a servant—and, on top of that, Xie Jinglan's exclusive attendant. Despite knowing better, he had no choice but

to humor him. Xiahou Lian would've summarized what he'd learned thusly: In the future, he definitely shouldn't marry anyone like Xie Jinglan.

On his third day of ignoring Xiahou Lian, Xie Jinglan returned to his inner chambers after dinner to read, as was his routine. Opening the book, he found a bright-yellow flower nestled in its pages, the vibrant color contrasting beautifully with the aged paper.

A shaggy head poked through the window. "Like it?"

Xie Jinglan picked up the small flower and said with disdain, "It's all squashed. Hideous."

"Oh no! I traveled such a long way to find that flower. I spent my entire day picking out the best of the best! It's a token of my feelings for you, Jinglan-shaoye!" Xiahou Lian said, adopting a deeply hurt expression.

Seeing his melodramatic face, Xie Jinglan felt both guilt and annoyance. He turned his head away, refusing to look at Xiahou Lian.

"I've got something serious to discuss with you," Xiahou Lian continued. "The lord didn't return alone—he brought someone back with him. You must've heard of Dai Shengyan. Do you know who he is?"

Xie Jinglan flipped through the book. "Mm-hmm. I know who that is: my father's teacher. He had the top exam score during the twenty-eighth year of the Qiyuan era. Then he was chosen as a shujishi[5] and rose to become the Minister of Ceremony. He has pupils from all over the nation and is known as the lord of the Hanlin Academy."[6]

"Exactly. The Minister of Ceremony is a fourth-rank official! That's far better than your hypocrite of a father's position," Xiahou Lian said as he climbed through the window. "He wants to take on a new disciple, so he'll test the young men of the Xie family at Lanfang Pavilion tomorrow. This is your chance, Shaoye. We must find a way to sneak in."

Xie Jinglan had been preparing to scold Xiahou Lian for climbing in through the window, but the moment he heard that Dai Shengyan was accepting a disciple, his eyes widened. Dai Shengyan had always had a keen eye for talent and a penchant for fostering promising youths; becoming his disciple would certainly brighten Xie Jinglan's prospects. Then he started to worry.

“Can I really do this? I’ve never properly attended any lessons; I’ve only overheard a couple of lectures, and I haven’t finished all the texts. On top of that, they already discovered that I’ve been studying in secret, so the mistress must already be on guard. I fear I’ll never even get the chance to meet Dai-xiansheng.”

Xiahou Lian wrapped an arm around Xie Jinglan’s shoulders and chuckled. “Who cares whether you meet him or not? Let’s give it a try! That won’t cost us anything. As for the mistress, I have my own ideas for dealing with her.”

Seeing Xiahou Lian brim with confidence, Xie Jinglan couldn’t suppress his suspicions. “Xiahou Lian, why are you trying so hard to help me?”

“Because I have a good heart!” Xiahou Lian was about to blurt, only to turn and see Xie Jinglan gazing at him with the utmost seriousness, eyelashes fluttering like delicate wings, his face as fair as fine porcelain. Xiahou Lian had never seen a youth so lovely in his twelve short years. His lips parted in a grin, and he said instead, “It’s your fault for being so dazzling, Jinglan-shaoye! I can’t help but adore you. I was captivated by you at first sight! I, Xiahou Lian, would brave fire and flood or traverse a forest of blades for you!”

Not responding, Xie Jinglan held his hand to his forehead. He shouldn’t have asked.

Chapter 4:
A River Serene

XIAHOU LIAN ROSE EARLY and dressed. He was about to go brush his teeth and wash his face, but as he approached the door, he overheard Lianxiang speaking with Xie Jinglan. He was about to dart away, but upon hearing Lianxiang speak his name, he stopped and stayed where he was.

"Shaoye, that Xiahou Lian kid—he's completely unreliable. Look at him! He never does any work—just spends his days wandering around. And he doesn't just wander, he steals and does all kinds of shady things. How can we let someone like that stay in the manor? He claims he'll introduce you to Dai-xiansheng, but that's just asking for trouble! The lord and lady are sure to be there when Dai-xiansheng selects a disciple. If you go, the mistress won't shrug it off!"

Xie Jinglan was quiet for a while. Lianxiang was right: Before entering the manor, Xiahou Lian must've been a thief on the streets. He was full of unsavory habits. Xie Jinglan would normally have felt nothing but disdain under the circumstances; he'd never have considered the other boy a friend. Yet for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to dislike Xiahou Lian at all.

Perhaps, Xie Jinglan concluded, it was because Xiahou Lian was handsome.

"Even if Xiao-Lian weren't taking me, I'd still go," he replied slowly.

"Shaoye! That boy will get you killed!"

"It's true that he has a weakness for thievery, but everything he's stolen since arriving has been for my benefit. Moving forward, I'll be sure to discipline him firmly and order him to refrain from such behavior. But he's not malicious, so there's no cause for worry," Xie Jinglan insisted. "You agree with me, don't you, Auntie?"

"That's right," Aunt Lan replied. "Xiao-Lian is still young, and he hasn't made any serious mistakes. Other than a few books for Shaoye, the only things he's pilfered are pastries and cakes from the other courtyards.

All children love treats. You should try to be more understanding, Lianxiang."

Since both Xie Jinglan and Aunt Lan were defending Xiahou Lian, Lianxiang was forced to relent.

Xiahou Lian kept listening, speechless.

Women were such headaches. Since when did he spend all day slacking off? Even when he roamed around, he was gathering information. If he'd stayed cooped up in the courtyard all day, how would he have learned that Dai Shengyan was accepting a disciple? Furthermore, those snacks had been sitting unattended on the pavilion tables—and he'd only taken a few. Was it really that big a deal?

That girl, Lianxiang, didn't have a face for charming men, but she'd managed to pick up a knack for it. She was terrified that Xiahou Lian might overshadow her and become Xie Jinglan's closest confidant. Whether cooking or washing, she always fussed and shouted—even the slightest scratch had her wailing dramatically about how she was going to die. Her goal was clear: She wanted everyone in the manor to notice her efforts and sacrifices.

Forget it. He, Xiahou Lian, was a man of principle. He wouldn't stoop to squabbling with a woman. He made a noise to alert those outside that he was awake, then opened the door and stepped through. As he finished washing, he heard the gate being latched shut.

Lianxiang rushed over. "Shaoye! They locked the courtyard!"

A voice called from outside, "Since an important guest will arrive at the manor today, the mistress has decreed that you are all forbidden from leaving the courtyard, to prevent your buffoonery from disturbing him."

Xie Jinglan remained impassive, but Aunt Lan's face creased with worry. "What do we do now?" she asked. "The gate is locked. How will you get to Dai-xiansheng?"

Lianxiang stuck resolutely to her earlier proposal: "Maybe we should just let it be."

Xiahou Lian exchanged a glance with Xie Jinglan. Each knew what the other was thinking—that if the gate was locked, they'd just climb over

the wall.

Xie Jinglan and his three attendants pushed tables and chairs against the wall, stacking them. Xiahou Lian clambered up the stack first with Xie Jinglan close behind. Aunt Lan and Lianxiang watched anxiously from below.

“Please be careful, Shaoye!” called Lianxiang. “Xiao-Lian, if the mistress gets angry, you must protect Shaoye at all costs. If anything happens to him, I’ll make you pay!”

“I know, I know,” Xiahou Lian said flippantly. “I promise not to let them harm a single hair.”

Once Xie Jinglan was atop the wall, Xiahou Lian leaped down. Xie Jinglan, on the other hand, balked a little. The wall was high, and a flicker of fear gripped him. He didn’t want Xiahou Lian to see that, however. With a deep breath, he closed his eyes and jumped—but instead of hitting the ground, he fell into a warm embrace. He opened his eyes to find Xiahou Lian’s face just inches from his own. Startled, he rolled out of Xiahou Lian’s arms.

“If you jump like that, you’ll definitely end up breaking your legs,” Xiahou Lian warned him sternly. “When you jump from a wall, you have to part your legs and bend your knees, the same way you do when you take a shit. If I hadn’t caught you, you’d have hobbled yourself before you even began.”

Xie Jinglan said nothing.

As they stood up, a young girl rushed over, breathless. “Lian-gege! Dai-xiansheng changed the lecture venue! Now it’ll be at Wangqing Pavilion by Yanbo Pond, and it’ll start in two hours. Everyone’s already set up.”

Xie Jinglan regarded the young girl suspiciously. “‘Lian-gege’?”

Xiahou Lian smiled sheepishly. “This is Miss Guixiang. She works in the study. I met her a few days ago. Thank you, Guixiang-meimei! I’ll treat you to some osmanthus cake tomorrow.”

Guixiang stuck out her tongue. “Just remember, I snuck out to tell you this! I need to hurry back now.” She bowed to them both and

scampered away.

“How smooth of you,” scoffed Xie Jinglan. “You’ve been at the manor only a few days, and you’ve already endeared yourself to ‘Guixiang-meimei.’ A private relationship between a male and female servant is a serious offense, you know. I’m already struggling to protect myself; if push comes to shove, I won’t be able to help *you*.”

Xiahou Lian certainly had a way with girls. The maiden hadn’t so much as looked at Xie Jinglan, yet her words to Xiahou Lian had overflowed with warmth and affection. Looking narrowly at the other boy, Xie Jinglan heaved an exasperated sigh.

“What ‘private relationship’?” Xiahou Lian protested. “The only private relationship I have is with you—and the gifts I gave you are collecting dust in your cabinet.”

“What nonsense are you talking?” retorted Xie Jinglan. “We’re both men! What kind of ‘private relationship’ would that be?”

Xiahou Lian made a face at him.

Before they’d set out, Xiahou Lian had lent Xie Jinglan one of his coats and draped a coarsely woven scarf over his head. Unless they looked closely, the average onlooker would take him for a lowly servant. Xiahou Lian retrieved two trays he’d hidden in the grass, and each boy took one. They kept their heads down and made their way to Yanbo Pond; the journey was smooth sailing.

Wangqing Pavilion had been built over the pond; its viewing platform sat directly above the shimmering water, unobstructed by a railing. Ascending to the second floor yielded a sweeping vista. It was a beautiful, elegant setting. All the Xie pavilions and buildings radiated cultured sophistication, as befit the family of scholars.

It was still early, so the two boys hid behind the rock garden, waiting for the junior clan members to take their seats. Xie Jinglan removed the borrowed coat and headscarf and Xiahou Lian helped him retie his hair and replace his hairnet and clasp. A few wardrobe adjustments later, and Xie Jinglan had transformed back into a beautiful youth.

Xiahou Lian stood and nibbled some snacks while Xie Jinglan sat reviewing his books. Overhead, a tree heavy with winter plum blossoms

stretched over the rock garden. A petal fluttered down.

Xiahou Lian drowsily crossed his arms. Looking back, his days had been quite peaceful lately—if cold.

Sounds and voices rose outside, and Xiahou Lian sensed that it was probably time. Peering through a gap between the rocks, he saw the young masters of the Xie family arriving at Wangqing Pavilion in groups of three or five, each dressed in splendid attire and adorned with perfumed pouches and jade pendants. A few had even tucked green jade flutes into their waistbands. They looked less like students attending a lecture or disciples seeking a teacher than like contestants in a pageant from which the emperor would select concubines.

Xie Jinglan, in contrast, looked quite dingy in his tattered robe. If he'd been placed among them, no one would've thought him a member of the Xie family. Instead, they'd assume that he was a lowly servant, barely fit to hold their shoes, let alone serve at their tables. Yet Xie Jinglan's heart remained serene and unfazed. To him, the Xie family's junior members were either obstacles to overcome or stepping stones to cross. The more elaborate their attire, the more he'd stand out among them. He might not be the best scholar there, but he would certainly be the most unique.

Moreover, Dai Shengyan also hailed from a humble background. He was born a concubine's son and raised in poverty. Each problem required a unique solution, and when seeking to become a disciple, accounting for a teacher's preferences was vital. Xie Jinglan's unpretentious attire would remind Dai-xiansheng of the hardships he'd faced during his own pursuit of knowledge, arousing his sympathy. Xie Jinglan glanced at Wangqing Pavilion.

"We can't enter through the main gates."

He was right. Several servants guarded the gates and would surely stop the boys if they tried to enter that way. Xiahou Lian glanced at the pond and spotted a small boat docked on the opposite shore.

"Let's row across!" he cried. "They're on the second floor, so once we're over there, Dai-xiansheng will see us right away. Then even the mistress won't be able to stop us."

Just then, Xie Jingtao came into view. After his whipping, even walking appeared to have become an arduous task. He limped along, leaning on his book-boy for support. With each painful step, his fat rippled like waves, and Xiahou Lian suddenly understood why he was called “Xie Jing*tao*.”[7] When he reached the second floor and plopped heavily into the best seat in the front, the entire Wangqing Pavilion seemed to groan under his weight. Even Xiahou Lian, hidden behind the rocks, felt the ground tremble beneath him.

After those juniors came the senior generation.

Guixiang had told Xiahou Lian that Dai Shengyan looked like a fire poker, that he was so thin that he was little more than a bony toothpick. “He must be an honest, upright official,” she’d mused. “Why else would he deprive himself so?” Xiahou Lian quickly spotted the withered old man in the crowd; he really was as Guixiang had described, emaciated to the point of being skeletal, his neck as slender as a stalk of hemp. Yet his beard was meticulously groomed, and it was long and snow white, like those of immortals depicted in paintings.

But there wasn’t time to scrutinize Xie Jinglan’s hypocritical father next. Xiahou Lian barked an order, and he and Xie Jinglan sprinted along the pond’s edge to the other side.

They were quickly spotted. At first, the servants were stunned, but after rubbing their eyes and taking a closer look, they recognized Qiuwu Courtyard’s third young master and dashed after the pair.

“Hurry!” one cried. “Stop, San-shaoye!”

“Grab them, fast!”

As Xiahou Lian sprinted forward, he pulled out a slingshot and launched stones behind them, squarely striking each of his targets. A couple pursuers even toppled into the pond with a splash. He quickly found himself out of stones but pretended to continue to shoot. Quite a few of their pursuers fell for it and paused to shield their heads. The cobblestone path hugging the pond was narrow, so when the servants in front suddenly stopped, those behind them didn’t have time to do likewise. They crashed into each other, falling to the ground in a heap.

Xie Jinglan's heart soared with both fear and exhilaration. He'd never run like this before, never been so reckless. He should've rejected Xiahou Lian's order, but when the other boy shouted "Run!" his body had somehow responded reflexively. He surged forward like an arrow from a bow, plunging into the biting wind with reckless abandon.

The two boys wove and darted through the trees and bushes bordering the pond like graceful birds, gradually pulling ahead of their pursuers.

Just as they reached the boat, Xiahou Lian raised his right hand and tapped a spring on his wrist with his left. An icy glint instantly shot forth from his sleeve, slicing through the rope and plunging into the water.

Xie Jinglan barely had time to be surprised before Xiahou Lian shouted, "Jump!"

As one, they leapt into the small boat, rocking it violently. Xie Jinglan almost lost his balance and fell into the water, but Xiahou Lian quickly grabbed hold of his collar, hauling him back just in time.

Xiahou Lian swiftly seized a bamboo pole and shoved it into the water. The boat glided forth like a fallen leaf grazing the pond's surface, ripples dancing in its wake as it bobbed toward the viewing platform. The servants chasing them could only halt at the bank and watch helplessly while Xiahou Lian and Xie Jinglan drifted into the distance and vanished among the misty waves. Xie Jinglan tamped down his urge to peek under Xiahou Lian's sleeve. Instead, he straightened his clothes and stood at the prow of the boat, hands clasped behind his back. Given the commotion they'd caused, Dai-xiansheng was sure to have noticed them, so Xie Jinglan would need to remain dignified and respectable.

Those already in Wangqing Pavilion had no idea what'd happened and couldn't make out any faces from such a great distance. All they saw was two young boys outrunning a group in pursuit, then leaping onto a small boat and rowing for the viewing platform. One boy stood on the prow, withstanding the chilly wind and surveying the rippling waters. There was something almost otherworldly about his demeanor.

Dai Shengyan clapped his hands and laughed. "Another member of the Xie family? How intriguing! Please send someone to bring him up."

Xie Bingfeng spoke up, embarrassed. "Our younger generation is unruly and full of youthful vigor. Your disciple has failed to guide them properly. I beg you to overlook this, sir."

Dai Shengyan smiled until the creases of his face seemed to bloom. "Not at all. That's how young people should be. Spending all their time shut inside, sitting and reading, would waste their youth and all this beautiful scenery. To simply study and study without going for the occasional stroll—that's putting the cart before the horse."

Sharp-eyed Xie Jingtao recognized Xie Jinglan at once. Displeased that Dai Shengyan was defending his rival, he cupped his hands respectfully and said, "Sir, I believe you've misjudged them. Your pupil recognizes those two. They're ignorant and incompetent, always slacking, and their lack of filial piety has earned them much notoriety within our clan—especially Xie Jinglan. He stole my belongings just a few days ago. I only forgave him out of respect for our brotherly bond."

Dai Shengyan's hand paused on his beard in mid-stroke. "Oh? Is that so?"

Chapter 5:
The Words of the Sages

A CLEAR VOICE RESONATED from outside the pavilion: “Of course not!”

Everyone inside raised their heads to watch the two youths in tattered robes enter. The boy in front strode forward with dignity and grace; the one trailing behind him radiated vigor and energy, eyes bright.

Still, the boys’ shabby attire prompted the young masters to whisper in their seats, gazes full of scorn. Xiahou Lian caught snippets of their conversations, such as “Where did these vagrants come from? They’re an eyesore here,” and “I’ve never seen him before. Is he even from this family?”

Ignoring them, Xie Jinglan said loudly, “Pupil Xie Jinglan has come to greet you, Dai-xiansheng. What Dage told you just now isn’t true. I trust that Xiansheng will understand.”

Xie Jingtao slammed his fists against the table and rose, his face and neck flushed crimson. “You claim I’m framing you, Xie Jinglan? You stole those books—in front of plenty of witnesses! Shall I summon them?”

Xie Jinglan gave a small smile, staying courteous. “When did I ever steal anything from you, Dage? I merely retrieved some books you tossed into the storeroom.”

“Are you saying that books don’t count as possessions? The books our family produces through Xiuwen Hall cost several coppers each. I didn’t throw them away; I placed them in the storeroom. You took them without asking. That’s theft!”

“Please stay calm, Dage. This is all just a misunderstanding. I am frail, so in her great kindness, the mistress did not make me go to school. Even so, I have long admired the wisdom of the sages. Unfortunately, I don’t receive a monthly allowance, so I could only ask the storeroom steward for my brother’s discarded books. The storeroom steward gave me permission to take them, but Dage may not have asked him and thus

wrongly believes that I stole them. I'm seizing the opportunity to clear that up today."

Xie Jinglan's words made the truth clear to everyone: The first wife resented this illegitimate son and forbade him to attend school. He was thus forced to rely on his eldest brother's castoffs, only for his brother to accuse him of theft.

Xie Jingtao stood there, mouth agape, unable to summon any retort.

At that moment, Xie Bingfeng spoke up. "Tao-er, don't you think you owe him an apology after slandering him so?"

Forced to concede, Xie Jingtao laughed awkwardly. "Yes, of course. My mistake—I failed to ask for clarification and thus accused you in error."

Both siblings sported smiles that didn't reach their eyes as they put on the show of brotherly love. The scene made Xiahou Lian prickle with discomfort.

In truth, Xie Jinglan had been forced to back down. He couldn't humiliate his fat brother here, in front of Dai-xiansheng. After all, if he failed to earn a spot as Dai-xiansheng's disciple today, all his efforts would only serve to embarrass him. At that point, the corpulent scourge would have no trouble making him pay.

Xie Bingfeng turned to Xie Jinglan, his demeanor warm and welcoming. "I don't believe we've met before. Are you from a branch family? May I ask who your parents are? If your family is in need, go ahead and take some silver from the treasury. Perhaps that will help with your household expenses. Once your health improves, you may also attend the clan school free of charge."

Deathly silence fell over the venue. What kind of farce was this? Didn't Xie Bingfeng recognize his own son?

Stunned, Xiahou Lian stared at the middle-aged man at the head of the table, gazing at his tall crown and flowing robes. Xie Bingfeng's expression was solemn as he sat with his hands firmly on his knees, his back as straight as a pencil. Not a single hair was out of place. All that was missing was the phrase *upright gentleman* stamped on his forehead.

Yet the moment Xiahou Lian laid eyes on Xie Bingfeng, he recalled finding that album—*Intimate Scenes of Leisurely Love*. Perhaps this "upright gentleman" also had *The Secrets of the Jade Room* or *The Secret Pastimes of Spring Nights* tucked away elsewhere. With that, the words he imagined across the man's forehead instantly transformed into *sanctimonious hypocrite*.

Xie Jinglan's face went pale, and his fists clenched tightly beneath his sleeves. The Xie family had many members, and Xie Jinglan had spent most of his time in Qiuwu Courtyard, so few of them recognized him.

"Yes, our clan has always been charitable," another ignorant man even chimed in. "Since you come from one of the family's branches, everyone will naturally help you."

These words only rubbed salt in Xie Jinglan's wound, leaving him reeling. He stared blankly at Xie Bingfeng. He'd greeted his father countless times during New Year's celebrations and sacrificial rites, and had always followed him on horseback when he journeyed to the capital.

As it turned out, Xie Jinglan had himself forgotten something: This was the closest he'd ever stood to his father. The man didn't recognize him at all.

Xie Jingtao was just as dumbfounded as Xie Jinglan. "What do you mean, 'one of the branches'?" he stammered. "Father, this is Xie Jinglan, your third son!"

Speechless, Xie Bingfeng stared at Xie Jinglan for a long while. When he finally regained his composure, his expression showed a combination of surprise, embarrassment, and shame, but not a speck of guilt.

Xiahou Lian's heart twinged painfully. Without thinking, he stepped closer to Xie Jinglan and silently gripped his cold hand.

Xie Bingfeng gave a strained smile. "Ha ha. Jinglan, you've grown so much—and I was away for so long, I actually forgot what you looked like. You won't hold that against me, will you?"

But even if his father didn't recognize him, surely he didn't forget Xie Jinglan's name as well? thought Xiahou Lian. *Unless.*… Was it possible that Xie Bingfeng hadn't picked the name "Jinglan"?

Xie Jinglan’s voice was somewhat dazed, his tone uneven. “You toil day and night, Father. You’ve been busy with the court. I...understand.”

Dai Shengyan quickly cut in to smooth things over. “Young friends, why don’t you both take a seat? As it happens, this other young man hasn’t introduced himself yet. Young man, I saw you rowing across the pond, and I’d love to make your acquaintance.”

Xiahou Lian remained standing for a long while before finally realizing that everyone around him was a member of the Xie family—there were no attendants or servants in sight. He folded his hands and replied, “I am Xiahou Lian, Jinglan-shaoye’s humble servant and book-boy. I was in too much of a hurry earlier to notice that book-boys aren’t needed here.” After a brief pause, he glanced at the dazed Xie Jinglan and added, “I often listen to our young master recite the words of the sages, and I too have grown to admire them. May I be allowed to listen in?”

“Of course you may.” Dai Shengyan nodded with a smile. “A desire to learn is commendable. How could I stand in your way?”

A cup of tea later, the commotion seemed to have been washed down and away; the guests had collectively pushed it from their minds. Dai Shengyan stroked the curled end of his distinguished beard and cleared his throat. The room immediately fell silent, as if a storyteller had struck a gavel for attention. All eyes were fixed on Dai Shengyan’s weathered lips as everyone eagerly anticipated his words.

“I would like to pose a question to all our young friends here: For what purpose do you study the texts of our sages?”

Everyone exchanged glances. For what purpose? To become an official and get rich—why else? Why would anyone dedicate their time to memorizing those dusty old books if not for the imperial examinations?

Put more diplomatically, one might say something like “I study to cultivate myself, guide my family, strengthen the nation, and bring peace to the world.”[8] Such lofty principles—bringing peace and security to all—flowed like water from scholars’ brushes and mouths; they were so frequently espoused—chewed and spat out—that they’d long since become dull and flavorless, losing any impact they had.

But Xie Jinglan wasn’t thinking about any of that.

He knew with perfect, crystal clarity what his desires were.

For him, studying had never been about bettering the nation for the benefit of all. He'd never cared how many pastries the street vendors sold, how many souls were laid to rest in unmarked graves, or whether a region was plagued by droughts or floods. He didn't even care whether the earth flowed with rivers of blood. As long as he was safe and secure at home, that had nothing to do with him.

All he wanted was for the Xie family—his family, who had forgotten, humiliated, and scorned him—to one day throw themselves at his feet and weep with regret. Just picturing that scene ignited a fire within him, and that imaginary exhilaration pushed him to force the sages' nonsense down his throat until his head spun and he staggered with exhaustion.

But he knew he must bury such thoughts deep inside. On the surface, he would maintain the guise of an upright gentleman concerned only for the country and its people. He concealed his dark, twisted thoughts beneath a facade of gentility and humility, and he couldn't let even the tiniest hint of them slip through.

Xiahou Lian squeezed his hand, and Xie Jinglan squeezed back, whispering, "Don't worry."

The inexplicably confident Xie Jingtao answered the question first. "I seek to cultivate myself, guide my family, strengthen the nation, and bring peace to the world. To me, those things define what it means to be a true gentleman!"

Dai-xiansheng neither praised nor criticized Xie Jingtao. He only swayed his bony head, which teetered atop his stalklike neck, signaling the next person to speak.

The second young master, Xie Jingtan, sat behind Xie Jingtao. "In my case, your pupil lacks both foresight and ambition. All I wish is to soar like a peng, to live unfettered!"[9]

Dai Shengyan chuckled. "To live unfettered—a wish unconcerned with worldly affairs. Yet that endeavor remains difficult."

Soon, everyone in the pavilion had spoken but Xie Jinglan. Dai Shengyan's gaze settled on him, and the man nodded gently.

Xie Jinglan bowed deeply. “This pupil is dull and foolish. But I strive to live without shame, without regrets, and without grievances.” His expression remained serene, as if the turmoil of his arrival had never happened.

Dai Shengyan sighed as he gazed at the youths. The Xie family seemed only to wane with each passing generation. He’d truly been out of his mind to accept its inept patriarch as his disciple. Though he’d yielded to Xie Bingfeng’s persistent invitations to visit the family residence, Dai Shengyan was treating it as a mere formality this time. As he’d expected, each young man seemed more incompetent than the last. On top of their appearances, even their mental aptitudes were a disgrace.

However, he hadn’t anticipated that amid those noisy, colorful roosters, there would be a solitary white crane. Yet it was a stubborn crane, one that stood too tall and unbending. One day, it was destined to be destroyed.

Dai Shengyan had lived a long life and encountered all kinds of people. He saw through Xie Jinglan’s clumsy posturing at a glance. His tightly clenched fists, the reddened corners of his eyes, and his stiff posture betrayed that this half-grown boy wasn’t nearly as calm as he seemed.

He was simply doing his best to hold on to the last scraps of his dignity.

Everyone had given their answer, but Dai Shengyan nodded only at Xie Jinglan, making the results clear. Xiahou Lian let out a sigh of relief; their trip hadn’t been in vain.

Xie Jinglan underwent the apprenticeship ceremony in front of the entire group. Dai Shengyan helped him rise from the ground, his frail, withered hand gripping Xie Jinglan’s arm. Despite the layers of warm clothing Xie Jinglan wore on that cold winter day, he felt intense heat radiate from Dai Shengyan’s hand, as if a hot iron were scorching him through his coat.

“You’ve yet to receive a courtesy name, correct, Jinglan?”

“This pupil isn’t of age yet and hasn’t had the chance to receive one,” Xie Jinglan confirmed.

“No matter,” Dai Shengyan said, smiling faintly at his young disciple. “You’ve faced many hardships, yet your mind remains firm, your ambitions high. But your personality is too obstinate, your heart too hard. I will give you the name ‘Jian’an’—‘simple peace’—in the hope that you can live simply and peacefully while following your heart’s desires. But you must remember: Though the world is fraught with challenges, the heart should remain kind.”

Xie Jinglan felt as if Dai Shengyan had emptied a bucket of cold water over him, drenching and chilling him to the bone. The shameful thoughts he tried so hard to conceal had been laid bare before the man’s gaze.

To live without shame—only when the Xie family threw themselves at his feet, repaying his years of humiliation, would he be free of guilt.

To live without regrets—only when he held life and death within his grasp to wield as he pleased would he be free of regrets.

To live without grievances—only when everyone he loathed was sucked into an inescapable mire could he be free of grievances!

Dai Shengyan had seen right through his half-baked answer. Xie Jinglan burned with shame, instinctively wishing to turn tail and flee. He was completely unable to understand why Dai Shengyan would want to accept someone like him as a disciple.

Xie Jinglan struggled to bow and express his gratitude. “Your pupil will remember your teachings,” he said.

Xiahou Lian had listened to the entire exchange in bewilderment. He still couldn’t tell whether this frail, skinny old geezer was praising or criticizing Xie Jinglan.

Whatever. Praise or criticism didn’t matter as long as he’d chosen Xie Jinglan.

Confused as Xiahou Lian was, the envy in the gazes around them was clear as day. Though Xiahou Lian wasn’t the one who’d been made a disciple, he held his head high as he proudly strutted from the pavilion after Xie Jinglan.

Xie Jinglan was quiet as they walked, his face pale. He looked sicklier than ever before.

Xiahou Lian's proud posture drooped as he walked beside him, helpless. He was a boisterous child, and the somber atmosphere made him uneasy. Xie Jinglan had suffered a heavy blow from his father, then successfully became Dai Shengyan's disciple—one sorrow and one joy. Xiahou Lian didn't know whether to offer comfort or congratulations.

Everything he could think of saying felt wrong. Suddenly, an idea struck him. He dashed in front of Xie Jinglan and threw his arms open to envelop him in a tight embrace.

Xie Jinglan gasped in shock, struggling to break free. "What are you doing?!" he yelled.

Xiahou Lian held Xie Jinglan in place. He was strong; Xie Jinglan knew that already. Sure enough, the new disciple's thrashing was futile.

"My mother said that hugs can cure all sadness—and you, Jinglan-shaoye, are the only person I've ever hugged, other than my mother. You should feel honored."

Xie Jinglan stopped struggling and pressed his face into Xiahou Lian's shoulder. He remained silent for a very long time, until something cool stained his face and salt filled his mouth. Fearful that Xiahou Lian would notice his tears, he kept his tone harsh. "I don't need your pity!"

Alas, he had yet to master the art of hiding his feelings—before he was done speaking, the bitterness within him had already seeped through.

Xiahou Lian released Xie Jinglan, but then grabbed his wrist, dragging him along as they ran.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

Xiahou Lian didn't answer as he barreled forward with Xie Jinglan in tow, knocking over countless servants, who shouted curses behind them. The wind chafed Xie Jinglan's face and dried the tears streaking his cheeks. Finally, he found that they'd reached the courtyard wall near the kitchen.

Xiahou Lian told him to stay put, then quickly scaled the wall and pushed off the top, vaulting over and inside. Xie Jinglan was still gasping

for breath. He'd run too fast; now his lungs seemed on the verge of bursting, leaving him helpless to stop the cocky little bastard.

Fuming, he scanned the area to ensure no one was watching. Then, stepping up onto a stone, he used all his might to scale the tree beside it. The moment he reached the top of the wall and peered over, he was struck with horror. That little bastard had actually slipped through the window into a kitchen where busy servants and chefs bustled around, completely oblivious to the uninvited guest.

Xiahou Lian crouched low, catlike, as he prowled toward the stove. He grabbed a jug of wine and stuffed it into his clothes, then escaped through the same window.

Only when Xiahou Lian jumped safely down from the wall did Xie Jinglan's heart settle in his chest. He grabbed Xiahou Lian by the collar and scolded, "What were you doing?!"

"Calm down, calm down," Xiahou Lian said gently, trying to soothe Xie Jinglan's ruffled feathers. "When you're sad, wine relieves your sorrows; when you're happy, you can toast in celebration! Now's the perfect time for some wine. Come on, let's go have a drink!"

Xiahou Lian pulled Xie Jinglan to a secluded spot. Well aware of Xie Jinglan's fastidiousness, he wiped the stones seven or eight times with his sleeve before tugging the other boy to sit down.

Xiahou Lian took a sip of the wine. Eyes watering from its burn, he handed the jug to Xie Jinglan. The boy refused, however; he never drank alcohol, especially not from someone else's vessel. It took Xiahou Lian much wheedling before Xie Jinglan reluctantly tipped his head back and sipped from the jug. He regretted it the instant the liquid made contact with his tongue, bursting into a fit of violent coughs.

Xiahou Lian laughed uproariously. "I don't pity you, Shaoye," he said after a pause. "I just can't stand seeing anyone sad. When you feel that way, I do too. And really, what about you is pitiable? You aren't missing any limbs. You don't lack food or clothing. You have enough to eat every day, and you're able to study and take the imperial exams. There's a bright future ahead of you! Why should I pity you? There are mountains of people worse off than you. My mother and I used to travel all over, so I met my share of pitiful people. I've seen men suffering from strange illnesses and

covered in sores, servants whose masters beat them within an inch of their lives, old folks who lost sons on the battlefield. But you? Sure, your parents might not love you, but compared to those I met, you practically live in a paradise."

Xie Jinglan opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"What name did that geezer give you?" Xiahou Lian went on. "'Jian'an'? I think your days are pretty simple and peaceful already—no heavy loads, no hard labor. When famine struck our mountain, I didn't even know when my next meal would be."

Xie Jinglan began to understand Xiahou Lian's standard for suffering. To Xiahou Lian, true suffering meant things like hunger, destitution, or being on death's door. Only someone as simpleminded as Xiahou Lian would think that way—you couldn't compare physical and mental suffering so easily. Still, Xie Jinglan couldn't help wondering what kind of life Xiahou Lian had led. It certainly didn't sound like a pleasant one.

"Just now, you said you'd traveled all over with your mother," Xie Jinglan remarked. "Was she the head of a theater troupe?"

Chapter 6:
The Sounds of Passing Geese

“DO I LOOK LIKE someone who can sing?” asked Xiahou Lian. “Although I do know some ritual dances.”

Xie Jinglan suddenly recalled the white light shooting from Xiahou Lian’s wrist back when they’d leapt aboard the boat. He grabbed Xiahou Lian’s right hand and pulled up his sleeve, startling him. “What is this thing?” he asked, staring.

On Xiahou Lian’s wrist was a metal bracer attached to a tiny, intricate crossbow. Xie Jinglan looked at him suspiciously. “Where did you get something like this?”

“Uh...” Xiahou Lian stammered, unable to offer an explanation.

“You mentioned your mother in the library, and now you say you’ve traveled all over. Could it be...?”

Xiahou Lian broke into a cold sweat, his hands and feet growing clammy. How was he going to smooth things over this time? If Xie Jinglan discovered he was an assassin, it would be disastrous. Once an assassin’s identity was exposed, they had to withdraw immediately...

Though he didn’t have a placard yet, so he didn’t count as a true assassin.

Then Xie Jinglan seemed to realize something. “So is your mother a thief too? Is stealing your family trade? If so, you can’t just call yourselves thieves at that point—you’re a sect of jianghu bandits!”

“If...if you say so...”

Xie Jinglan let go of his sleeve. “Keep this secret; don’t let anyone find out. I knew that there were clans of gentry and martial arts sects, but I had no idea that thievery could also be a family vocation... Such underhanded acts aren’t becoming of a gentleman. It’s good that you turned over a new leaf. Work hard going forward, and don’t do those things again.”

Xiahou Lian quickly agreed, breathing a silent sigh of relief.

Xie Jinglan gazed up at the wispy clouds drifting overhead. Every now and then, a bird darted past, only to vanish in the distance.

If he could just become a bird or a cloud in the sky, oblivious and unaware, perhaps he'd truly be able to live without regrets or grievances.

"Xiahou Lian," he said softly. "Tell me about your parents."

"Huh?"

"I used to think that, though my mother was gone, I at least still had a father. He was just far away in the capital, unable to take care of me; I was sure he loved me regardless. I never expected that he'd completely forget he had another son." Xie Jinglan smiled wanly. "So, tell me about your parents. I'm curious about how it feels to have them."

Xiahou Lian scratched his head. "Well, I actually don't have a father either. I grew up with my mother, and we lived in the mountains. She was a big deal in our line of work, so she was always taking on jobs. Sometimes I didn't see her for months. But whenever she was free, she took me into the mountains to hunt pheasants and rabbits or raid birds' nests. It was a lot of fun. Life in the mountains was tough, especially in our area. Famine was common, and even money didn't help much. When we ran out of food at home, my mother and I would sometimes walk miles to other houses to beg for food. At times, she'd manage to get us a bite or two. Other times, the family had no rice either, and they'd chase us away with a broom. But my mother taught me not to fear shame—putting food in your belly is more important."

Xie Jinglan wasn't sure what to say. He struggled with his response before finally replying, "Your mother is truly...extraordinary."

Perhaps it was better not to have a mother.

Xiahou Lian naively took this as a genuine compliment and smiled sheepishly. "She's pretty unreliable sometimes—she makes holes bigger when she mends them, and she practically burns down the kitchen when she cooks. Still, she's got quite a reputation in our line of work. As for my father, well, I've been trying to find out who he is for a long time. I think he may have been a great hero in the jianghu. After all, given my mother's personality, she wouldn't have fallen for a scholar, right? One day, he'll

come riding on a horse to take me and my mother away. We'll roam the jianghu, happy and free."

"Then where is your mother now? Why did she sell you to a trafficker?"

"She took a job in the Western Regions. Before she left, she entrusted me to my uncle, but he found me annoying and sold me off. He said he'd buy me back once my mother returned."

Rather than responding, Xie Jinglan wondered, *What kind of family is this?* He suddenly felt that it was miraculous that Xiahou Lian had survived this long.

"But my uncle says that we're always gambling our lives in our field," Xiahou Lian continued. "Our colleagues on the mountain seldom live past forty. Recently, two of our seniors died on that same job in the Western Regions. I don't know if my mother will make it back."

"It's that dangerous? Then why take the job?"

"Well, people like us don't really have a choice," Xiahou Lian replied evasively, unwilling to go into further detail. "We have a boss; if we don't comply, he'll kill us."

Xie Jinglan was still confused, but he wasn't one to pry. From Xiahou Lian's shiftiness, he guessed that this was forbidden information, so he pressed no further. "It'll be fine," he clumsily comforted Xiahou Lian instead. "Your mother's amazing, so I'm sure she'll return safe and sound to fetch you."

"Mm-hmm," Xiahou Lian said vaguely.

Uncle Duan had warned him about the Western Regions' dangers, but Xiahou Lian stubbornly believed that his mother was invincible—not because he was so sure of her strength but because he didn't want to think about it too deeply.

For a while, neither boy spoke. Xiahou Lian felt a little tipsy. Face flushed, he turned to look at Xie Jinglan, who was frowning slightly with a somewhat forlorn expression.

Xiahou Lian leaned over and wrapped his arm around Xie Jinglan. "What's wrong?" he asked with a grin. "Going to miss me? Don't worry—

I’ll come visit you every now and then! We’re brothers, after all!”

Xie Jinglan turned his head away and snorted. “Who’s your brother? You’re my servant—my book-boy!”

Then he lowered his gaze. His crescent-shaped eyelashes fanned low, casting a shadow over his eyes and concealing the emotions within. He’d long understood that no one could stay with anyone forever. His mother was gone, and eventually Aunt Lan and Lianxiang would be too. Xiahou Lian would someday leave as well—it was only a matter of time. If parting was inevitable, then he shouldn’t put too much of himself into certain feelings.

He gently shook free of Xiahou Lian’s embrace and started down the cobblestone path. No matter how many times Xiahou Lian called after him, he didn’t look back.

Lianxiang and Aunt Lan were overjoyed upon hearing Xie Jinglan’s good news. Now that Xiahou Lian had genuinely helped the young master, Lianxiang warmed up to him significantly. That evening, she made rice cakes and even brought one to Xiahou Lian, something she’d never done before.

However, Xiahou Lian gradually noticed that Xie Jinglan had begun to ignore him no matter what he did. Even when Xiahou Lian accidentally spilled tea at Xie Jinglan’s feet, Xie Jinglan merely lifted his eyes, glanced at him, then walked away to continue reading. His lips remained tightly sealed; he refused to speak to Xiahou Lian at all.

Given how fussy and fastidious Xie Jinglan normally was, he should have long since flown into a temper.

Even Aunt Lan and Lianxiang, who were usually oblivious, noticed that something was off. Between themselves, the pair quietly discussed how the young master had grown colder and wondered whether someone had angered him. After a bit of self-reflection, they declared themselves innocent and dragged Xiahou Lian in for questioning, but poor Xiahou Lian was as clueless as they were.

Before Xiahou Lian could solve the mystery, the mistress had sent people over. They brought in books, writing materials, and even a full set of desks and cabinets. The moment the matron leading them stepped into the courtyard, she cried, “My goodness! How could the third young master live

in such a shabby place? He doesn't even have a study! What are you servants doing? The roof's leaking, and no one reported it to the steward to get it fixed? Quick, clean this mess up and make room for a study!"

"I wonder what ill wind blew these weasels in," Lianxiang muttered.

It was indeed quite strange. Normally so neglected, Qiuwu Courtyard was now full of people milling about. Each was more raucous than the last, to the point that Xie Jinglan found himself with a pounding headache. The matron jabbed and prodded, disparaging Aunt Lan as "bumbling" and Xiahou Lian as "shifty." She assigned four or five new maidservants to the courtyard, then insisted on giving Xie Jinglan a new book-boy. Only Xie Jinglan's firm rejection allowed Xiahou Lian to keep his position, and the new book-boy was sent to the study with some trivial duties.

In truth, Xiahou Lian wanted to be replaced. Lounging around in the study all day, reading fiction, sounded like heaven.

"San-shaoye, we apologize for the delay in delivering your writing materials. The mistress went to the market personally to purchase them, then hired craftsmen to make these cabinets and desks. Look—they're all high-quality pearwood. We hope you can forgive us," the matron said with a bow.

Xie Jinglan nodded expressionlessly and gestured to Xiahou Lian to bring some of the writing materials to the inner chamber. He also strictly forbade anyone other than Xiahou Lian to enter his bedroom.

The matron's expression darkened. *So young and already so imperious*, she thought.

If Xiahou Lian had heard her thoughts, he would've laughed his head off. In truth, Xie Jinglan simply considered outsiders unclean. Xiahou Lian was only allowed into his bedroom because Xie Jinglan forced him to bathe three times a day—although Xiahou Lian's method of bathing was simply pouring three buckets of water over his head.

The craftsmen started repairing the house, clanging and banging. Xie Jinglan turned a deaf ear to the noise and greedily ran his fingers over some long-coveted rice paper, enchanted by its softness. He'd only ever practiced on rough straw paper. Although Xiahou Lian had given him rice paper

before, he hadn’t dared to use it. Now, he could write freely on high-quality paper.

As he examined it closely, he realized it was the same paper Xie Jingtao used.

Bursting with excitement, he mixed some ink and began writing. The moment his brush tip touched the paper, ink bloomed in its wake. He wrote a few characters and judged them passable, then raised his head to see Xiahou Lian flipping through the new books, clearly bored out of his mind.

Handing him the brush, Xie Jinglan asked him to write a couple characters. Xiahou Lian didn’t refuse, promptly writing his name. Xie Jinglan looked down. The strokes were wild and sloppy—an ant’s haphazard tracks might’ve pleased the eye more.

“Don’t look too hard. I’ve never practiced before; I just scribbled whatever,” Xiahou Lian said. He set down the brush to gawk at the chaos outside the window, head propped in his hand. “The first wife and your father are birds of a feather—both hypocrites. Look at how they spoil you now that you’re Dai Shengyan’s disciple.”

Xie Jinglan’s new writing materials had brightened his mood. He was about to respond when he remembered he was ignoring Xiahou Lian. Swallowing his words, he picked up the brush and focused his full attention on practicing his calligraphy.

Xiahou Lian was baffled. However he racked his brain, he couldn’t figure out what he’d done to upset Xie Jinglan so.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Xiahou Lian opened it to find Matron Liu from earlier standing there. “Shaoye,” she said, “the mistress says that, since your health has improved, you must participate in the morning and evening greetings again. Out of consideration for your poor health, we haven’t been enforcing the rules in recent years. But now that you’re Dai Shengyan’s disciple, you must recognize proper etiquette. Thus, after dinner this evening, the mistress requests your presence in the main courtyard so that you can learn proper manners. Otherwise, you could make mistakes during your studies and become a laughingstock.”

Xie Jinglan nodded indifferently, dismissing the matron. “I understand.”

At that point, an awkward silence fell over the two boys. Xie Jinglan didn’t seem to mind, picking up a book to read, but Xiahou Lian found the study stifling. That blockhead Xie Jinglan now paid attention only to reading and practicing calligraphy. Xiahou Lian couldn’t get a word out of him, no matter how he squeezed.

Bored out of his mind, Xiahou Lian snuck back to his room for a nap, only to be caught by the lately arrived Matron Liu. She found this distasteful and spent a full afternoon bad-mouthing Xiahou Lian to Xie Jinglan. His head pounding from her complaints, Xie Jinglan decided that Xiahou Lian might as well sleep in the study. With the door closed, no one would know whether Xiahou Lian was serving tea or napping anyway.

But every time Xie Jinglan saw Xiahou Lian sprawled there, asleep, he couldn’t help but wonder whether master and servant had reversed their positions. Resigned, Xie Jinglan poured his own tea, mixed his own ink, and fixed Xiahou Lian’s blankets when they slipped off.

Chapter 7:
Snow in Jinling

THAT EVENING, Jinling welcomed its first snowfall of the winter. Dark roof tiles were cloaked in white, and branches creaked with snow, looking as if they'd been gilded with pear blossoms.

Xie Bingfeng's first wife, Lady Xiao, sat upright in the main hall. Her sharply curved eyes seemed to pierce anyone who met her gaze, her crimson lips a thin line. Her fingernails were polished red as talons that had just clawed out someone's heart. Although her husband had a constant aura of righteousness, Lady Xiao's appearance was harsh and severe—it screeched a warning that she was not to be trifled with.

Xie Jinglan arrived after dinner to pay his respects, accompanied by Xiahou Lian. Lady Xiao was no ordinary foe, and sure enough, she detained them as soon as they arrived. In a high-pitched, warbling voice almost like an opera singer's, she said, "Well done, Xie Jinglan. I underestimated you. I never imagined you could familiarize yourself with all those precepts even in the squalid Qiuwu Courtyard. With proper guidance, you might even become one of the Three Ducal Ministers[10] someday!"

"You flatter me, Lady," Xie Jinglan sneered. "The future is uncertain. Who knows what may happen?"

Though his words were humble, there was no humility in his voice. Instead, it sounded like he was all but gnashing his teeth, promising to one day make her kneel in apology.

Lady Xiao's eyes were full of contempt. "And here I thought you had some real talent. You're just a baby who can't even disguise his true thoughts. Did you think a little cleverness would be enough to lift you above your station? What use is all that knowledge if I keep it locked inside you, never to see the light of day?"

Xie Jinglan's headstrong expression faltered.

"At first, I wanted to play the role of a loving mother, especially considering how much sway that geezer Dai has. He's tricky to deal with.

But the moment I see you, it reminds me of that seductress.” Her gaze on Xie Jinglan was bone-chilling. “You look too much like her.”

Xie Jinglan couldn’t hold back his anger. “Plenty of men have multiple wives and concubines. You’re much too jealous, Lady.”

“Jealous?” Lady Xiao’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “I come from a prestigious family in Jiangzuo. We have produced generations of officials for the court; my father was the Left Censor-in-Chief of the Censorate. If not for me, your good-for-nothing father would never have risen to a sixth-rank position! You men are all the same—full of sweet words but worthless. I believed your father’s empty promises and married into the Xie family, only for him to fall into bed with your mother while I was pregnant!”

“That’s my father’s fault. Why take it out on me?”

Lady Xiao looked down and picked at her nails, her smile tinged with derision. “What else can I do? I can’t do anything to Xie Bingfeng; our fates are intertwined. But a little brat like yourself? I have plenty of ways to deal with you.”

The mockery in her expression deepened, though it wasn’t clear whether she was aiming it at Xie Jinglan or herself.

“You...”

“I was kind before. I fed and raised you, a weed no one wanted, too weak to cause any fuss. Never did I imagine that you’d dare covet what belongs to my son. You didn’t just steal his books; you caused a scene at Wangqing Pavilion and stole his rightful spot as disciple. You’ve dug your own grave. Don’t blame me.”

Xiahou Lian spoke up, fearless fool that he was. “Lady, do you truly not see what your son is like? If Xie Jinglan hadn’t joined in to answer Dai-xiangsheng’s question that day, I doubt any of the Xie family’s sons would’ve met Dai-xiansheng’s standards.”

Lady Xiao narrowed her eyes at Xiahou Lian. “Where did this mongrel come from? How dare you speak so insolently to my face?! Maids, give him twenty lashes with the rod!”

Two matrons stepped forward and grabbed Xiahou Lian, forcing him onto a long bench. Xiahou Lian kicked and thrashed like a fish facing death

defiantly on a chopping block. The matrons' hands were like iron clamps pinning his shoulders down, and soon his legs were restrained as well. The feisty fish was transformed into a carcass ready to be sliced and filleted at their mercy.

The first lash landed. Xiahou Lian's thighs screamed with agony; he felt as if he were being torn apart.

Horrified, Xie Jinglan threw himself over Xiahou Lian's body. "Stop! Stop! He can't take any more! Lady, I'll learn whatever rules you want! Just stop!"

The hags didn't dare risk hitting Xie Jinglan; they stepped back. Xiahou Lian collapsed against the bench, exhausted, buttocks still burning with pain.

Since direct confrontation clearly didn't work, Xiahou Lian tried a different approach. Raising his head, he said, "Lady, Jinglan-shaoye may not be your blood, but if he makes it to the top one day, he will bring honor not just to himself but to the entire Xie family! After all, you're his legal mother. If he fails, the failure is his alone, but if he succeeds, you're sure to share in his glory!"

Lady Xiao remained unmoved, her cold smile unchanging. "You have quite the sharp tongue for one so young! Remember this: If the Xie family prospers, it will be due to my sons, Jingtao and Jingtan. A bastard like Xie Jinglan will never have a turn!"

Xie Jinglan's eyes dimmed, and his lips curved into a bitter smile.

"However, Jinglan," said Lady Xiao portentously, "it's true that things are different now. You are Dai-xiansheng's disciple; I can no longer do as I please with you. Still, Dai-xiansheng is one of our era's greatest scholars. If you don't learn the proper etiquette, you'll shame the Xie family, and everyone will say that I failed to teach and discipline you. Today, you'll begin by learning to kneel. The rest we'll cover later."

With a glance from Lady Xiao, the two matrons stepped forward and dragged Xie Jinglan into the snow. One kicked the backs of his knees, forcing him to kneel with a muffled groan.

Xiahou Lian was horrified. "What are you doing?!"

The matrons then grabbed Xiahou Lian and shoved him to his knees beside Xie Jinglan. Xiahou Lian thrashed violently, but the matrons' strength overwhelmed him. Their burning hands pressed down like mountain boulders on his shoulders, immobilizing him.

Xiahou Lian gritted his teeth. *This entire household is full of witches!*

"When kneeling," one matron rasped, "your back must be straight, your shoulders level. Slouching is forbidden. Keep your hands at your sides and nowhere else." Xiahou Lian had set his weight on his calves, and the matron kicked him face-first into the snow, filling his mouth with slush. "Don't sit like that! Kneel properly!"

Fuck you! Xiahou Lian was ready to explode with fury. He longed to leap up and fight these old hags to the death. He and Xie Jinglan had escaped the rod but not the kneeling. The old witch was determined to make them suffer.

Lady Xiao stood atop the steps, looking down at them as though they were insects, her eyes cold and full of scorn. "After kneeling for two hours, you may leave. But..." she blew on her nails, then continued flippantly, "every mistake the matrons notice in your posture will add another two hours."

With that, Lady Xiao went inside, leaving the matrons to watch Xiahou Lian and Xie Jinglan from the walkway. After only a few minutes, Xiahou Lian's knees were sore and his back ached. Night had fallen, and the cold wind grew fiercer, chilling his face until he lost all feeling.

Xiahou Lian glanced over at Xie Jinglan, who was still as a statue—his gaze lowered, his thoughts a mystery. Xie Jinglan's health was poor to begin with; his face was as pale as paper, his lips bloodless. Xiahou Lian stopped worrying about himself and began worrying about Xie Jinglan. Kneeling for two hours? How could the boy's frail body withstand that?

The two matrons sat by a stove, glaring at them like tigers watching their prey.

Suddenly, Xie Jinglan spoke, his voice weak and lifeless. "I can't win against her. However high I climb, she'll always be able to crush me."

"Stop talking nonsense. That old witch is just trying to scare you. She pisses me off," Xiahou Lian responded. "Hey, Shaoye, could I run and get

help? Where does Dai-xiansheng live? Would your father come save you?”

“You won’t be able to escape. There are two matrons here, five or six maids inside, and who knows how many servants at the gates and in the backyard. If they team up to grab you, you won’t even be able to move,” Xie Jinglan said, his eyes dim and lifeless. “I was naive. I thought that becoming Dai Shengyan’s pupil would start me down the path to success. I thought if I focused on the imperial exams—entry, provincial, then palace—I could change my fate. But I forgot that I was born into the Xie family, a prestigious clan of literati in a nation that prizes filial piety above all. If the mistress spreads rumors that I’m unfilial, my career will be ruined. She has a thousand—ten thousand—ways to destroy me.”

“Don’t believe her,” Xiahou Lian said, struggling to comfort him. “She’s just trying to scare you. Look at her! Does she look like a proper lady of the house? She isn’t dignified at all. I don’t know what your father saw in her. We sure can’t marry anyone like her in the future.”

Xie Jinglan weakly shook his head. “She’s honest, though. She doesn’t bother pretending with me. A stepmother who hid her cruelty beneath her smile while crushing the life out of me would be even worse—I probably wouldn’t even have had the chance to speak with her before ending up dead in Qiuwu Courtyard.”

It was the first time Xie Jinglan had felt so powerless. He was like a drowning child flailing in the water—unable to stop himself from sinking, however hard he splashed.

Powerlessness surged over him like a tide, slowly engulfing him.

More and more snow fell, blanketing their heads and shoulders. From a distance, the two boys looked as if they’d aged into old men. Xie Jinglan felt icy cold, the chill seeping through his padded clothes and into his bones. Snow clung to his hair, and frost to his eyelashes. His face was so pale that, at a glance, it was impossible to distinguish snow from skin.

His consciousness began to drift, and his vision blurred. Suddenly, someone draped a warm coat over him. A pair of hands slightly warmer than his own brushed the frost from his face, then clasped his hands. He looked up groggily, saying faintly, “Xiahou Lian?”

Xiahou Lian tossed aside all concern over his posture. He pulled Xie Jinglan into a tight embrace, rubbing the other boy's hands and face with all his might.

Since he'd given his coat to Xie Jinglan, cold wind now funneled unimpeded into his collar, chilling him until his nose ran. The boys huddled together, trembling, like birds frozen within a blizzard.

"He's going to die! He's going to die!" Xiahou Lian shouted hoarsely. "Let us go! Hurry up!"

Pity colored one matron's face, and she went inside to ask for instructions. When she returned, she silently sat down beside the stove and turned her face away, unwilling to look at the boys.

"That bitch! That fucking witch. It serves her right that she gave birth to trash like Xie Jingtao." Xiahou Lian held Xie Jinglan tightly. Their foreheads pressed together, their breaths misting between them. "Shaoye! Don't scare me like this!"

Xie Jinglan struggled to open his eyes. He gave Xiahou Lian a weak glance but said nothing.

Xiahou Lian whispered into his ear. "Shaoye, do you have any money? Give me some!"

"You can't bribe them," Xie Jinglan murmured, his voice barely as loud as a mosquito's buzz.

"No—just give me some money. Even a single coin will do," Xiahou Lian said through gritted teeth. "I'll take care of that old hag for you!"

Assassins from Qiye Garden never accepted less than a hundred taels per job, but since Xiahou Lian wasn't yet a full-fledged assassin, he didn't mind giving Xie Jinglan a discount.

“Don’t...don’t talk nonsense,” Xie Jinglan said, unsure whether he’d even spoken aloud. He felt as if he were frozen through—no longer a person but a block of ice. Xiahou Lian’s voice seemed to grow distant, until he could barely hear it.

“I’m a thief, remember? But my family doesn’t just steal money—we also steal lives. Here, feel my boot,” Xiahou Lian said, guiding Xie Jinglan’s hand into his boot shaft. Xie Jinglan felt something hard and angular, its surface intricately engraved. He shuddered, instantly roused from his stupor.

With what little strength he had left, Xie Jinglan gripped Xiahou Lian and forced words out through clenched teeth. “If you...if you do anything reckless, I...I...” He trailed off, unable to think of a threat to deter Xiahou Lian. Then he simply bit the other boy’s shoulder.

It was a vicious bite; Xiahou Lian gritted his teeth in pain. Xie Jinglan didn’t let go until the taste of blood bloomed on his tongue.

Xiahou Lian exploded in rage. “Are you a dog?! If you don’t want my help, fine! But you repay my offer by chomping a hole in my shoulder?!”

An icy voice drifted over. “What’s this? Fighting between yourselves?” Xiahou Lian looked up to see Lady Xiao watching them coldly. She glanced up at the sky and added, “I’m retiring to bed. I’ll let you off for today. You may go.”

Xiahou Lian heaved a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, Xie Jinglan was on the verge of passing out. Touching his forehead, Xiahou Lian was shocked to find it burning hot despite the freezing temperature.

“Hey!” he cried. “Shaoye!”

Xie Jinglan slid down Xiahou Lian’s body and fell to the ground in a heap, mumbling incoherently. He was delirious with fever.

Xiahou Lian had no choice but to trudge arduously toward Qiuwu Courtyard, carrying Xie Jinglan on his back. After kneeling for two hours, his legs were numb and frozen. The first few steps were agonizing—each

one sent him tumbling to the ground, and the two sprawled in the snow as Xiahou Lian struggled to rise again.

The road seemed endless, longer than ever before. Xiahou Lian desperately wanted to go find Lianxiang and Aunt Lan to help him, but he was afraid that Xie Jinglan would freeze to death before he returned.

“Don’t...don’t be reckless,” Xie Jinglan muttered, his face tucked into Xiahou Lian’s neck. Xiahou Lian could barely make out his words.

By now, Xie Jinglan scarcely felt the cold wind. He only felt his head spinning. Each time he opened his eyes, vertigo overcame him, and with it, the urge to vomit. *If I throw up on Xiahou Lian*, he thought nonsensically, *will* that *idiot go crazy?*

“Relax,” said Xiahou Lian. “I won’t do anything stupid.” He tugged Xie Jinglan upward and continued, “Don’t fall asleep, Shaoye. Talk to me. Don’t die on me.”

A little less groggy, Xie Jinglan closed his eyes. “If I die, you won’t lose much,” he said. “After all...you’re going to leave anyway.”

“But I’ll be so torn up. I don’t have many friends. You’re my first real brother,” Xiahou Lian said, resting his head gently against Xie Jinglan’s. “How about...how about you come with me? I’ll take you back to the mountains. We’re poor there, but there’s plenty of game, so you won’t go hungry. My mother won’t mind having another son.”

Managing to tug his lips upward, Xie Jinglan offered a listless smile. “Are you asking me to elope?”

Chapter 8:
The Bodhi Saber

IN THE END, Xiahou Lian had to continue carrying Xie Jinglan on his back. He returned to Qiuwu Courtyard crawling on all fours.

Aunt Lan and Lianxiang stood anxiously at the gate, watching from afar as a figure crawled across the ground, carrying a second figure. They muttered to themselves, wondering what kind of scoundrels would behave so out in full view. Upon closer inspection, however, they realized the person on top was none other than their young master!

The two women rushed forward, frantically helping Xie Jinglan onto Aunt Lan's back. Lianxiang touched his forehead. "He's burning up!" she exclaimed.

Aunt Lan carried Xie Jinglan into the courtyard, shouting to Lianxiang, "Go fetch the doctor!"

Xiahou Lian, lying limp on the ground like a dead fish, called out weakly, "Don't forget about me! I have a fever t..." Before he could finish, his vision went dark, and he passed out.

When he woke up again, he found himself lying in the firewood shed.

What am I doing here?

He lay in a daze for a moment, realizing that his memories ended with their return to Qiuwu Courtyard. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't recall what had happened after.

His throat was parched. It seemed as if there were metal in his mouth, bringing with it the salty pungency of rust. Although he wanted to cough, he couldn't. He crawled to the door and pushed it hard, only to hear a lock clink.

The door was locked. *What the hell is going on?!*

The shed was drafty, and Xiahou Lian's teeth chattered from the cold. He'd wrapped Xie Jinglan in his own padded coat, leaving himself only two thin layers of clothing. Curling up like a cat, he shivered uncontrollably.

“Xiao-Lian! Xiao-Lian!”

Xiahou Lian’s eyes snapped open as Lianxiang’s round face peeked through a small window in the wall. Seeing Xiahou Lian awake, she squeezed three steamed buns through the bars.

Xiahou Lian crawled over and picked up the buns, holding them to his chest as he shouted up to Lianxiang, “Jie, I need water!”

Lianxiang attempted to push a waterskin through the bars, but the gap was too small; it wouldn’t fit. “I’ll pour water in from here. Open your mouth and catch it.”

Xiahou Lian did as she said. Water trickled down; he barely managed to catch a few sips.

“Did you get any?” Lianxiang asked, her hands gripping the bars, face grave with concern.

“I got some. I’m fine,” Xiahou Lian said, chomping into a bun. “What’s going on? How come I’m here?”

“Just after you and the young master returned to the courtyard, the mistress’s people came to take you away. They accused you of being disrespectful and inciting the young master to misbehave. Then they had you locked up! Guixiang from the study told us you were here, so I came in secret,” Lianxiang said, holding back tears. “You stupid brat. I warned you not to cause trouble. Now look what’s happened! Hey, has your fever gone down? Do you feel any better?”

I don’t think so. Xiahou Lian didn’t need to touch his face to know that he was flushed red. He felt like he could’ve fried an egg on his cheek. “That old witch probably wants me dead,” he told Lianxiang. “She can’t touch the young master for now, so she’s taking it out on me. Jie, can you find Dai-xiansheng and ask him to rescue me?”

Dai-xiansheng wasn’t in the manor, however, and it was the middle of the night. How was Lianxiang supposed to find him? She opened her mouth but couldn’t bring herself to tell Xiahou Lian the truth. Instead she said, “Alright, wait here. They say a scourge can live for a thousand years, and you’re a *major* scourge, so you’d better hold on.”

“Don’t worry, I’m as tough as a cockroach. I won’t die that easily.”

After Lianxiang left, Xiahou Lian got moving as well. He devoured the buns and felt some of his strength return. Then, hauling his sore limbs around, he cleared out a space, gathered some dry firewood, and began rubbing tinder together. His hands were raw by the time a spark finally caught, but he pushed on until the wood burst into flames.

Warmed by the fire, he felt himself returning to life. He curled up once more beside the flames.

The fire was small, and Xiahou Lian's back was still cold. He was a little worried—was he really going to die here? An assassin of Qiye Garden dying at the hands of a feeble old woman would be such a disgrace.

Xiahou Lian stared into the flames. His eyelids drooped uncontrollably, as if weighted by stones. As he lay in a stupor, the door appeared to open, and a hunched old man walked in. Xiahou Lian's lips were pried apart, and a bitter liquid was forced down his throat. His eyes snapped open; struggling fiercely, he grabbed at the man's hand, which seemed as strong as iron.

The old man let go, looking at him with annoyance. "That was medicine for your cold. Why are you struggling? Do you want to live or not?"

The old man had a head of white hair and a long, beaked nose. One eye was cloudy, as if covered by a film. Although he usually kept his head down, he now looked directly at Xiahou Lian, undisguised hostility burning in his gaze.

Anyone who saw those eyes could tell that this was no ordinary old man. After all, killers were said to look different from ordinary people. And Xiahou Lian knew where that difference was: It lay in someone's eyes.

Those with blood on their hands carried bloodlust in their very gaze. They had witnessed the fragility of the dying. To them, humans were no different from chickens, ducks, or dogs—if you sliced their throats, their bodies fell limp in just the same manner.

Xiahou Lian understood in an instant. "So you're the mole from Qiye Garden! Forgive my rudeness, sir."

The old man set down a box of food and scanned Xiahou Lian from toe to head. With every inch his gaze rose, he sighed, until finally his eyes

reached Xiahou Lian's face. He looked at Xiahou Lian as though the boy was mud that couldn't be molded, despairing over the Garden's tenuous future.

Xiahou Lian felt as if he'd been stripped bare, then prodded and inspected all over. Discomfited, he turned around and drank the medicine quickly.

Once he finished, the old man sighed again. "I've heard of you, Xiahou Lian. Just as I expected, you're very much like the Garuda."

"Of course." Xiahou Lian grinned.

The old man continued, "However, I didn't count on you picking up all of her bullshit and none of her brilliance."

Xiahou Lian had no response.

"Listen to me," the old man said. "You're not cut out to be an assassin. An assassin must be discreet and deflect attention. Moreover, they must be ruthless, able to kill even gods and Buddhas standing in their way. You're too mischievous, and your heart is too kind—neither quality suits an assassin. That Xie Jinglan is just a young master doomed to die in this manor. How can you kill when you care so much for others?" Spittle flew from the old man's mouth as he reached his conclusion: "Go back to the mountains, kid, and become a farmer. Don't bring shame on our Garden."

"I don't believe you," Xiahou Lian objected. "If assassins must be heartless, how come you're saving me? Why did Uncle Duan take care of me? With my saber, I'll kill those who deserve to die and cut down those who must be felled!"

"I didn't kill you because you're not my target. I've helped you because Duan Jiu asked me to. Hmph! If someone put a price on your head, I wouldn't hesitate to kill you! Kid, you may have the bodhi saber, but you lack the heart for murder. An assassin without that is doomed!"

"Who says I don't have the heart for it?" retorted Xiahou Lian. "Give me a saber, and I'll kill that old witch Lady Xiao right now! One strike; I promise I won't hesitate."

"That's not the heart to kill; it's the desire for revenge. Killing someone you hate is easy. But what if you have to kill a stranger or even a

loved one? For instance, could you bring yourself to kill Xie Jinglan?" The old man's cloudy eye stared at Xiahou Lian. "If Lady Xiao paid Qiye Garden for Xie Jinglan's life, I guarantee that your mother, the Garuda, wouldn't hesitate to cut him down."

"But she'd never kill *me*," Xiahou Lian said quietly, head bowed. "No one can be completely heartless."

"Stubborn brat," the old man sneered. "Fine, I'll give you a choice. You know your situation—Lady Xiao sees Xie Jinglan as a thorn in her side. When she crushes him, there will be collateral damage, and it'll be you who's dragged into it. If you give up on being an assassin, I'll get you out of here. Qiye Garden has a rule: An assassin captured by the enemy must commit suicide. But since you're not an assassin, I can save you."

Without hesitation, Xiahou Lian said, "Go, then. I'll stay here."

At this point, whether he became an assassin was secondary. He simply couldn't leave Xie Jinglan alone. *Whatever.* Regardless of whether this old man saved Xiahou Lian, Uncle Duan wouldn't just have stood by and done nothing.

The old man glared at him. "Stubborn mule," he muttered. Huffing in rage, he pulled a scroll from his robe and tossed it to Xiahou Lian. "You have five minutes to memorize this map," he told the boy. "Remember every word I say next."

Xiahou Lian jolted and sat up straight. Was he finally getting a mission? Was he a full-fledged Garden assassin at last?

He hurriedly unrolled the scroll. It was a map of the Xie manor, detailing the property's walkways, pavilions, paths, doors, windows, rock gardens, and even trees. Xiahou Lian had already familiarized himself with most of the estate through all his wandering, and considering his near-eidetic memory, five minutes was more than enough for him to memorize the map in its entirety.

"If you can get out, find an opportunity to sneak into Xie Bingfeng's study and locate his letters. Make a list of everyone he corresponds with. Remember, be careful. Don't expose yourself. If something goes wrong, prioritize your own safety and retreat. If you fail, someone else will take over."

“Don’t worry. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

Xiahou Lian knew Qiye Garden’s code: If a planned strike failed, an assassin retreated immediately. Garden assassins never took extreme risks to kill targets; training an assassin often took over a decade, so the Garden couldn’t afford to lose them. Xiahou Lian had met fewer than twenty assassins from the mountain.

As he studied the map, doubts arose in Xiahou Lian’s mind. “Why do we need that list? Will doing this…harm the Xie family?”

The old man snorted, clearly frustrated. “I told you that you aren’t cut out for this! You constantly worry about this or that, yet you still want to be an assassin? Not to worry. It’s probably nothing serious. Xie Bingfeng most likely offended some official and spurred them to look for dirt on him. Proof of a cabal, for instance.”

Cabal? Xiahou Lian mulled this over, relying on his limited knowledge, and decided it didn’t sound like a serious crime. In the stories he’d read, officials were executed for treason or for defiling the imperial harem—not for making friends.

“That man is a hypocrite. A fake gentleman. If he were fired, it would be no great loss.” Xiahou Lian thumped his chest. “Leave it to me!”

The old man took back the map and tossed a blanket to Xiahou Lian. Then he picked up the food box and left, locking the shed door behind him.

“Since you’ve got time now, you might as well study your saber techniques, kid,” his voice instructed. “From what I see, when it comes to working hard, you can’t compete with even Xie Jinglan. After all, that kid recites poetry even while taking a dump.”

Xiahou Lian looked up. The old man stood outside but peered in through a small gap in the door. Xiahou Lian could only see his cloudy eye. For some reason, he felt the old man was looking at him as if he were already dead.

He recalled Uncle Duan saying that if he did receive a placard, he wouldn’t survive past twenty.

Bah. Xiahou Lian snorted. *They’re all blind. Don’t look down on me. Like they say, don’t pick on poor young people!*

Xiahou Lian unfolded the blanket. Tucked inside was a copy of Qiye Garden’s saber manual.

He’d flipped through the volume countless times, but he always skipped the first page, going straight to the saber techniques. This time, for whatever reason, he didn’t rush to that section but opened the manual to the first page. It contained only one sentence: *I bestow upon you the bodhi saber. Kill and become enlightened.*

Chapter 9:
Gratitude for One's Teacher

BY THE TIME the sky paled, the snowstorm had stopped, and Xiahou Lian finally saw Dai Shengyan and Xie Jinglan arrive. Surprisingly, Xie Bingfeng accompanied them. His square jaw was tense, and when he saw Xiahou Lian's pale, nearly lifeless appearance, a hint of guilt flashed across his face. Given Xie Bingfeng's past hypocrisy, however, Xiahou Lian couldn't shake the feeling that it was an act.

Dai Shengyan felt Xiahou Lian's forehead and neck. "You have an excellent constitution, my young friend. To think, you spent the entire night in this drafty shed, and you aren't feverish." He took off his own cloak and wrapped it around Xiahou Lian.

The cloak was made of mink fur, and its soft fluffiness against Xiahou Lian's face restored some warmth to his frozen cheeks.

Dai Shengyan's words were pointed, and Xie Bingfeng reddened slightly. He walked over to Xiahou Lian and patted his head. "You're fine now." He sighed. "The mistress really is too harsh. You're just a child. Although you made a mistake, she shouldn't have punished you so severely. Since you're all right, go back and get some rest. And don't break any more rules."

What Xie Bingfeng said sounded comforting, but each word reinforced that Xiahou Lian had deserved punishment; he had broken the rules, and the Xie family, in their mercy, was letting him go. Hearing him, Xiahou Lian almost coughed up blood. He wanted to make a retort, but Xie Jinglan grabbed his hand, shaking his head slightly.

Xie Jinglan hadn't been shut in the shed, yet his face was even paler than Xiahou Lian's, devoid of all color—as if the one locked inside all night had been him.

Xiahou Lian was worried. "Are you all right?"

Before Xie Jinglan could respond, a shrill female voice rang out. Everyone turned to see a tall, thin woman approach alongside several

maids. Her eyes were cold, her nails bright red. It was Lady Xiao. “A mere servant, yet nonetheless so esteemed, for the head of the Xie family and the great scholar Dai to hurry here at the crack of dawn. Seeing a crowd gathered at such an early hour, I thought the shed might’ve caught fire! Speaking of the shed, this is all my fault. I acted too harshly, locking this child up for the night. Shall I apologize to him directly?”

Xie Bingfeng looked pained but forced himself to reply, “Let’s put this matter behind us. The boy has been scolded and punished. Let him go back and rest. The Xie family has strict rules, yes, but we’ve always treated our servants kindly. Remember that next time.”

It would’ve been better if he’d said nothing. Lady Xiao bristled like a cat whose tail he’d stepped on, her expression darkening. She smiled coldly.

“Yes, you’re right. I manage the house incompetently, and I mistreat our servants; both things bring you shame. But I will remember the family teachings and strive to be kinder in the future. That said, this Xiahou Lian has a clever tongue, and I find myself rather fond of him. Why not let him stay and entertain me? What do you think?”

Both Xie Jinglan and Xiahou Lian felt a chill run down their spines, instinctively stepping backward to hide behind Dai Shengyan. Xiahou Lian glanced nervously at Xie Jinglan, whose expression was also full of worry.

Dai Shengyan subtly shielded them. “Unfortunately, I’ve already purchased this child,” he said calmly. “He’s my servant now.”

“Oh? Is that so?” Lady Xiao asked in astonishment.

Xie Bingfeng nodded. “As I said, Teacher, if you like this child, you may have him. As a gentleman, I would never ask for payment; money changing hands brings discord.”

Lady Xiao smiled, a hand over her mouth. “What a coincidence! I also like this child very much. I still have his deed of sale. If I insist on keeping him, will Dai-xiansheng challenge me over it?”

Dai Shengyan’s expression finally turned grave.

The atmosphere in the shed was stifling. With five people inside, the space was cramped, and Xiahou Lian struggled for air. He no longer felt

cold; in fact, it seemed a little too warm. The smell of rotting wood, mixed with the odor of Lady Xiao's perfume, only made it harder to breathe.

Dai Shengyan placed his thin, bony hand on Xiahou Lian's head. That hand was so shrunken, it felt like a tree branch. The weather was frigid, the earth frozen. Only Dai Shengyan's palm still radiated gentle warmth.

But that slight warmth was enough, and Xiahou Lian calmed down.

Dai Shengyan stroked his beard and spoke slowly. "To be honest, I find this child exceptionally bright and talented. With proper guidance, he could become a great scholar or military strategist, capable of bringing peace and security to our nation. Whether he carries on the teachings of Confucius and Zhu Xi or follows in the footsteps of Zhuge Liang and Sima Yi, he will become a sage of unmatched greatness, a model for all generations to come. I trust you wouldn't let such talent go to waste."

A sage of unmatched greatness? A model for generations to come?

Xie Bingfeng and Lady Xiao looked at Xiahou Lian. A string of mucus had run from his nose to his lip. He sniffed hard, and the snot disappeared, leaving a shiny trail.

Xie Jinglan and Dai Shengyan couldn't help averting their eyes a little.

Although embarrassed, Xiahou Lian said brazenly, "Maybe Confucius was also a snotty kid when he was twelve."

"By twelve, Confucius could already set up and carry out sacrificial zudou rites," whispered Xie Jinglan.

"What's a zudou rite? Some kind of tasty bean?"[11]

Xie Jinglan didn't dignify that with a response.

Having served as an official for many years, Dai Shengyan had mastered the art of lying through his teeth. Convincing himself that he saw the shadow of a great sage in the slouching Xiahou Lian, he continued, "This child is naturally gifted. I've seen countless people in my life, so I'm absolutely sure of that. I'm determined to take him as my disciple. If the mistress struggles to part with him, I'll have no choice but to invite the

esteemed prefectural magistrate himself to join us so that he can have a constructive discussion with the mistress."

Jinling's prefectural magistrate, Su Zhuocheng, was one of Dai Shengyan's countless disciples. The magistrate was known for his unquenchable thirst for talent. If they involved him, they would be handing Xiahou Lian over themselves.

Now it was Lady Xiao's turn to look displeased. She could oppress others with her power, but Dai Shengyan could likewise bring his seniority to bear. Xiahou Lian was indeed an official servant of the Xie household—if they refused to let him go, he would never be able to leave the residence. Even so, etiquette took precedence, and Dai Shengyan was the nation's foremost scholar. If the Xie household refused to release Xiahou Lian, they'd gain notoriety for suppressing someone talented.

Even if that person hadn't learned to recite a single poem nor to read the words of a single sage.

"My wife is being rude," said Xie Bingfeng. "Please don't listen to her. I know you never discriminate when it comes to accepting pupils. Discovering a beloved disciple in humble circumstances is inspirational, and it isn't something my wife ought to try to prevent." Xie Bingfeng turned to look at Lady Xiao. "Lady, it's early in the morning and chilly outside. You should head back and rest."

Lady Xiao snorted coldly. "Then allow me to congratulate Dai-xiansheng on his new beloved disciple. I hope the child lives up to your expectations and becomes a man capable of governing the country and protecting the people!"

Xiahou Lian was very self-aware; he figured it'd be a miracle if he didn't upend the country. As for him *governing* it, he feared the country would quickly collapse under such circumstances.

Dai Shengyan smiled calmly. "Of course," he said, rather than "thank you." Lady Xiao's face turned even uglier.

Xie Jinglan's complexion was a ghastly paper white. As Lady Xiao and Xie Bingfeng left, Xiahou Lian touched the other boy's face. Unsurprisingly, he was burning with fever.

Xie Jinglan was more fragile than even those noblewomen who never left their chambers, but Xiahou Lian didn’t have time to click his tongue in astonishment. He hoisted Xie Jinglan onto his back, then—offering Dai Shengyan hasty thanks—rushed back toward Qiuwu Courtyard. Dai Shengyan was left standing alone in the snow, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

After that, Qiuwu Courtyard was once again in chaos.

Xie Jinglan remained sick and bedridden for several days. Thanks to his confinement, Xiahou Lian also suffered a brief period of lethargy, but before long, he was back to his lively self. He was strong and robust from years of martial arts training and swordplay, with a strong constitution—when stricken with fever, all he had to do was sweat it out. He stood in sharp contrast to Xie Jinglan, whose spirit seemed to be traveling to the gates of hell and back, terrifying everyone around him.

The distressed Lianxiang couldn’t help muttering, “Why did Dai-xiansheng have to stay at Magistrate Su’s house that night? This is all his fault. The moment Shaoye woke up, he climbed over the wall to find Dai-xiansheng, even though he was still sick! It’s so vexing!”

“It couldn’t be helped,” Aunt Lan soothed her. “Fortunately, the young master is fine now. He just needs more rest.”

Suddenly, Xiahou Lian popped in without warning, startling Lianxiang. “Lianxiang-jie, did you say Shaoye went out to get help for me?”

The day before, Xiahou Lian had received his own deed of sale. After mulling it over a while, he decided not to throw it away or burn it. Instead, he went to Dai Shengyan and asked whether he could give the deed to Xie Jinglan. Dai Shengyan neither permitted nor forbade it, saying he was free to do as he pleased. Pocketing the deed of sale again, Xiahou Lian made his way back. As he passed the kitchen, he’d happened to overhear Lianxiang muttering.

He’d never imagined that Xie Jinglan could have mustered the strength to crawl out of bed and track down help for him—all while delirious with fever.

Lianxiang pressed her hand to her chest and took several deep breaths. It was a while before she managed to grumble, “What’s wrong with you? Why are you always scaring people like that?! Yes, the young master knew that you were locked up, and he was beside himself with worry. I found out that Dai-xiansheng was at the Su residence, so the young master climbed over the wall and left. Aunt Lan and I couldn’t stop him. Pelted with cold wind that early in the morning—it’s no wonder he came down with a fever!”

Xiahou Lian snatched the medicine Lianxiang held from her hands. “I’ll take this to him.”

As he grabbed it, the medicine’s pungent aroma wafted to his nose. The sheer bitterness made him click his tongue. How awful it must be for Xie Jinglan to have to drink it day after day. Xiahou Lian rarely took medicine when he was sick. That was firstly because his mother was rarely in the mountains, so no one would know he was ill, and secondly because he was usually tough enough to recover on his own.

Xiahou Lian carefully pushed open Xie Jinglan’s door and looked in to see whether he was awake.

Xie Jinglan was leaning against the bedframe. He lifted his eyes from his pile of books to see Xiahou Lian peering in furtively, like a thief.

“You’re really something else,” said Xiahou Lian. “Sick as a dog, and yet you still remember to study.”

“You should study too. Xiansheng’s lectures will start the day after tomorrow. He said that the first class will test our understanding of Mencius’s texts.”

“Got it, got it,” Xiahou Lian replied dismissively, bringing the medicinal soup to Xie Jinglan’s lips. Xie Jinglan drank it in one gulp without batting an eye. The candied fruits Xiahou Lian had prepared for him were superfluous now.

Xie Jinglan was about to pick up his book and keep reading, but Xiahou Lian pushed his hands down. “Wait, Shaoye. Look. I’ll show you a magic trick!”

“No.” Xie Jinglan refused without a second thought.

“Come on, it’ll be quick. Just one look!”

Xie Jinglan had no choice but to sigh and sit back, waiting for Xiahou Lian to begin his performance.

First, he showed his empty hands to Xie Jinglan. Next, he casually grabbed at the air as if catching something. His preparations complete, he shoved both hands beneath Xie Jinglan’s nose.

Xiahou Lian smiled radiantly, then pursed his lips, silently signaling Xie Jinglan to pry his hands open. Xie Jinglan glanced at his face and reluctantly opened Xiahou Lian’s left hand. Inside was a crumpled piece of paper—an ugly, dingy thing. It looked a bit like straw paper from the latrine.

Disgusting. Xie Jinglan didn’t want to deal with this at all. He reached for his book.

“Hey, humor me! Open it and take a look!”

Xie Jinglan hesitated for a moment before finally opening the paper ball. His gaze froze on the paper. “Wh...why are you giving me your deed of sale?”

“I’m staying on as your book-boy until my mother comes for me. So I’m leaving my deed of sale with you for safekeeping.”

“I don’t want it. Hold on to it yourself.”

Xiahou Lian shoved the paper into Xie Jinglan’s hand. “Just hang on to it. Some people who *want* my deed of sale can’t get it!”

“Hmph. You’re talking about yourself like you’re some precious treasure.”

Despite his sardonic words, he placed Xiahou Lian’s deed of sale in a small, locked box that he stashed in his clothing trunk. Then he turned back to Xiahou Lian and opened his other fist, in which he found a rusty copper coin.

Picking it up, Xie Jinglan asked, “What’s this? Looks like something from the Tang dynasty.”

“I found it in a grave back in the mountains. I actually found four, but my mother took the other three. She said I should keep this one as an

heirloom to give to my future wife.”

In a grave? Disgusting! Xie Jinglan flung the coin back at Xiahou Lian as if scalded. “Your mother must be out of her mind! Who’d want something like that? If you give that to a girl, she’ll dump you without a doubt.”

Xiahou Lian pressed the coin back into Xie Jinglan’s hand. “You keep it. If you ever need me after I’m gone, place it at the highest point in the city. No matter where I am, if I’m alive, I’ll come to you.”

Xiahou Lian looked unusually serious. Xie Jinglan had never seen him like this before. Xiahou Lian was always so carefree and unkempt, even his posture while walking was sloppy. But his usual playful grin and mischievous winks were nowhere to be seen now, and Xie Jinglan felt unsettled.

The coin in his palm still carried Xiahou Lian’s warmth. Xie Jinglan’s hands were always cold, especially in the winter, and the coin felt as though it was burning his palm, the heat spreading up his arm to his chest. It was hot to the point of being scalding.

“You...” he stammered, stunned. He paused, then muttered, “It’s fine, Xiahou Lian. I got used to my mother being gone and my father ignoring me. I’ll get used to not having you by my side too. No matter what happens, I’ll just have to get used to it.” He rubbed the coin in his hand, then added, “Once I become an important official, though, I’ll have your boss captured. You’ll be free, and you won’t need to steal anymore.”

“Sounds good to me! I’ll be counting on you, Shaoye!”

Chapter 10:
Distilled Autumn Water

DAI SHENGYAN, the old geezer, seemed particularly fond of Wangqing Pavilion. He had even set up his classroom there. Thanks to a few snow-free days and the warmth of several charcoal braziers, Xie Jinglan—although wrapped snugly in furs—no longer had to fear the lakeside chill.

The scenery around Yanbo Lake was all the more mesmerizing in the depths of winter. The sky and water were shining expanses of white, the distant mountain range smudged between them like a stroke of dark ink. Initially, it seemed as if they were seated inside a landscape painting.

But Xiahou Lian was only there to pass the time. During every class, he propped a book on the table with a novel hidden underneath it. When he felt like it, he listened briefly to the lessons on benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust. And when he lost interest again, he napped or read his novel.

His lack of ambition exasperated Dai Shengyan. At first, the old man tried to encourage him, but he eventually gave up.

Xie Jinglan, meanwhile, listened with rapt attention. After just a few days, dense annotations covered his book. Xiahou Lian felt dizzy just looking at them.

Dai Shengyan's classes were quite intriguing. He taught only in the mornings, leaving the afternoons for Xie Jinglan to read while fishing from the pavilion's viewing platform. If Xie Jinglan had questions, he could go to Dai Shengyan and ask. During such a session, Xie Jinglan stood respectfully by Dai Shengyan's side and posed questions for what felt like hours. Meanwhile, Xiahou Lian sat idly by, counting down the minutes until he could go home and chase sparrows.

Dai Shengyan shook his head at Xiahou Lian. "The essence of learning lies in thinking. If you think, you'll have doubts, and if you have

doubts, you'll ask questions. Don't you have anything you'd like to ask, Xiao-Lian?"

Xie Jinglan replied for him. "Xiahou Lian doesn't even read real books. What could he possibly ask? My guess is that he's only curious about the best way to catch birds."

Xiahou Lian laughed. "Shaoye knows me best."

Dai Shengyan sighed; he was at the end of his rope. "Are you serious?"

Xiahou Lian was equally resigned. "Fine, Xiansheng. Since you asked, I do have a question."

"Oh? Let's hear it."

Xie Jinglan also turned to look at Xiahou Lian, who stuck out his tongue and asked, "Of all the Confucians, was Confucius the most knowledgeable?"

"Of course," Dai Shengyan replied.

"Then did *he* have to memorize the *Mencius* and Tang dynasty poetry? Or write eight-legged essays?"

Dai Shengyan chuckled. "How could he have memorized the *Mencius*? Mencius lived a century after Confucius. Tang dynasty poetry and eight-legged essays came even later. This question is rather sloppy, Xiao-Lian."

"Ohhh," said Xiahou Lian, drawing out the sound. "But if even Confucius, the wisest of them all, didn't have to study those things, why must we?"

Dai Shengyan was speechless for a moment. "Fine, fine. I'll leave you be."

From that point forward, Xiahou Lian was free to do as he pleased. As long as he turned in a few poems each day, he'd pass. But even writing poems, with their rhyme schemes and structural guidelines, was torturous. Xiahou Lian would scratch his head, rack his brain, and sneak a few glances at Xie Jinglan's work before cobbling a few lines of his own together. The days were so onerous that Xiahou Lian felt like he would go prematurely gray.

But Dai Shengyan's classes weren't entirely boring. During breaks, he often shared anecdotes from his travels or horror stories he'd read in books.

Though Dai Shengyan appeared thin and frail, the classic image of a proper old scholar, his taste in stories was surprisingly dark. Nine out of ten tales he told were frightening, and some were particularly chilling, such as "The Human-Faced Arm Sore," "The Hand Beneath the Bed," or "The Smiling Mountain Flowers."

In truth, Xie Jinglan thought Dai Shengyan's ghost stories were a waste of time. He would've preferred more discussions on Mencius. He couldn't very well interrupt, though, so he tried instead to study on his own as Dai Shengyan spoke. Yet a moment of carelessness later, he'd find himself hooked, and before he knew it, he'd listened to one spine-chilling tale after another.

Xiahou Lian, who was fearless by nature, saw the horrific stories as trifles, like bedtime snacks. He'd heard plenty of tales that were bloodier and more disturbing. However, this was Xie Jinglan's first time hearing such tales, and Dai Shengyan's eerie descriptions sent shivers down his spine and raised prickling goosebumps on his skin. Despite his fear, he was captivated, hanging on to every word. At night, he tossed and turned, unable to stop himself from checking his arms for a dreaded human-faced sore.

Outside his window, rain began pattering, accompanied by howling wind. The roof tiles rang beneath the plink of raindrops. Xie Jinglan couldn't sleep, so—barefoot, with his blanket trailing behind him—he headed to the outer room to join Xiahou Lian. All he found there, though, was an empty bed.

It was the dead of night. Where could he have gone?

Had he been kidnapped by a ghost or something...?

Of course, Xiahou Lian hadn't been abducted by ghosts. At that moment, he was creeping along the walkways, leaping and climbing until he reached Xie Bingfeng's study and vaulted through the window.

Xie Bingfeng's study was significantly larger than Xie Jingtao's and brimmed with enough books to dazzle the eye. Xiahou Lian made a beeline

for the desk, pulling open each drawer until he discovered a stack of letters. Unprotected by lock or key, they likely weren't confidential. Relying on his eidetic memory, Xiahou Lian quickly skimmed each letter's contents, memorizing every name he read.

Xie Bingfeng's life seemed terribly dull. The letters either discussed scholarly pursuits—music, chess, calligraphy, painting—or current political affairs—droughts in eastern Zhejiang, floods along the Yellow River, Tatar invasions at the borders, and so on. There were also quite a few tirades against the eunuch faction.

Suddenly, hurried footsteps approached outside the study. Xiahou Lian froze, then quickly replaced the letters, closed the drawer, and hid inside a cabinet.

The study door opened. Two people stumbled in, colliding with the desk. The sound of heavy breathing filled the room. Who would dare to fight in Xie Bingfeng's study?

"Close the door, you scoundrel," a delicate voice panted.

"All right, all right, I'll close it," a male voice replied.

Xiahou Lian held his breath, staying perfectly still inside the cabinet.

These two were clearly in the throes of passion, the desk shaking with their movements. The woman moaned more and more loudly, her voice mingling with the man's heavy breaths.

Xiahou Lian wasn't ignorant of such activities. He'd flipped through a few of his mother's illustrated books in secret, and though he'd never experienced it himself, he knew enough to blush at what he was overhearing.

He gently cracked the cabinet door open and saw two bodies entwined atop the desk. The woman's eyes were closed, her expression a mix of pain and pleasure, while the man's back was to Xiahou Lian. Each thrust caused the desk to shudder violently.

The woman's hand slid up the man's spine. Suddenly, her seemingly delicate fingers clamped down, then yanked and twisted. A sharp crack echoed through the room, followed by a muffled groan as the man collapsed

to the floor like an old, torn sack. His eyes were vacant; he was clearly dead.

Xiahou Lian had never seen a corpse before. The sight was far more gruesome than the tidy lines of text in his novels or his mother's simple descriptions conveyed. The body was still warm, its bloodshot eyes open in an empty stare. Xiahou Lian stared at the pale face, his hands growing cold as he clutched the cabinet door.

He covered his mouth, terrified, and quietly pulled the cabinet door shut, waiting for the woman to leave.

Suddenly, the delicate voice spoke again. "Come out, little thief in the cabinet."

He'd been discovered! Heart racing, Xiahou Lian debated whether to obey.

At that point, a blade as thin as a cicada's wing pierced the cabinet door, stopping an inch from Xiahou Lian's nose. He gaped at the gleaming blade, his heart nearly leaping from his throat.

"If I stab again, it will draw blood."

Xiahou Lian covered his eyes with one hand and crawled from the cabinet. "Spare me, Jiejie! I didn't see anything—I don't know anything!"

"No? I wondered who'd be brazen enough to sneak into the lord's study in the dead of night. So it was you, young Xiahou."

Lowering his hand, Xiahou Lian saw a beautiful woman standing before him, her lips curved in a half smile. She was dressed like the manor's maids and was still disheveled from her earlier "battle." Her garments had slipped down, revealing her rounded shoulders and breasts.

The woman reached under her arm and tore away the white mounds, then peeled off her mask to reveal a handsome, elegant face. She stretched her neck, her cracking bones echoing as she instantly grew several inches taller.

Before Xiahou Lian's stunned eyes, she had transformed into a man.

"You—you're Qiu-dage!"

The Kinnara, Qiu Ye, was one of the Eight Legions of the Garden. Xiahou Lian had often seen him in the mountains. Qiu Ye was amiable; he was usually the first person Xiahou Lian and his mother begged for food.

Suddenly, Xiahou Lian wondered whether Qiu Ye's blade was the man's famous Qiushui.

Who could've imagined that his first meeting with Qiu Ye away from the mountain would be so…complicated? For a long time, Xiahou Lian was speechless.

"Hm. You didn't know my special talents." Qiu Ye flashed Xiahou Lian a radiant smile. "My family's secret techniques are bone-shrinking and disguise."

"I've only heard about them. The descriptions…truly don't do them justice," Xiahou Lian said, mouth agape.

Qiu Ye kindly helped Xiahou Lian close his mouth, saying with a smile, "To think I'd meet you in a place like this. What a fateful encounter. My Qiushui almost killed you just now."

Xiahou Lian didn't respond. He could really have done without such a fateful encounter.

"Xiao-Lian," Qiu Ye continued, "I can sense your extraordinary talent. If your mother happens to meet her end in the Western Regions, come find me. Become my disciple, and I'll teach you my techniques. Then you can charm and seduce all the women and men you wish. What do you say?"

Hell no. He didn't want to end up some kind of half-man, half-woman thing!

Xiahou Lian shook his head like a rattle drum.

Qiu Ye sighed in disappointment and flicked Xiahou Lian's head. "You little brat. You can't appreciate the benefits of this ability. Others beg me to teach them, and I still refuse."

"I'll stick to swordsmanship," Xiahou Lian insisted. His image of Qiu Ye as a kindly older brother had been shattered. Even speaking to him was awkward now. "I can conquer the world with my saber alone; I don't need your help. Besides, I have no doubt my mother will come back safely."

“You haven’t even got a proper saber. How will you conquer the world?”

“I’ll get a proper one eventually,” Xiahou Lian muttered. “Why are you here, Qiu-dage? Did someone hire you to kill that guy? He looks familiar—is that the Xie manor’s steward?”

“Have you forgotten Qiye Garden’s rules? We work independently, and we never get involved with each other. Go back to bed. When I have time, I’ll find you, and then we can have some fun together.”

“Mm-hmm...”

Xiahou Lian left the study, glancing back every few steps. He desperately wanted to ask Qiu Ye how he’d fooled the steward into believing that he was a woman.

Weren’t men and women built differently? Were those paintings all lies?

But, in the end, Xiahou Lian couldn’t bring himself to ask.

Qiu Ye watched Xiahou Lian leave, then pulled another mask from his robe and slid it on. He stripped the dead man and put on his clothes, then wiped Xiahou Lian’s footprints from the windowsill. The scene now clean, Qiu Ye closed the door and carried the corpse away.

Anyone passing at that moment would’ve been terror-struck, for the living man carrying the corpse looked exactly like the dead body itself.

Xiahou Lian returned to Qiuwu Courtyard in a daze. As he opened the door, he saw Xie Jinglan sitting beside his bed, wrapped in a blanket and nodding off.

Xiahou Lian’s heart nearly leapt from his chest. How long had Xie Jinglan been waiting there?

Xie Jinglan rubbed his eyes and looked up, saying groggily, “Where did you go? Why are you coming back so late?”

“I went to the latrine.”

Xie Jinglan looked at him suspiciously. “What took you so long? Are you constipated or something? Too much yang energy?”

“Maybe a little,” Xiahou Lian lied guiltily, then pushed him aside. “Why were you sitting here? I’m going to sleep.”

Xie Jinglan stood for a moment, hesitating. “It’s...cold outside. Want to come sleep in the inner chamber?”

“Cold? There are two braziers in here.” Xiahou Lian looked at Xie Jinglan’s conflicted expression and suddenly understood. “You’re scared to sleep alone?”

“You’re the one who’s scared! I’ve always slept alone.” But Dai-xiansheng *had* been telling a lot of ghost stories…

Xiahou Lian already knew the truth, but for the sake of Xie Jinglan’s dignity, he chose not to voice it. He obediently picked up his pillow and blanket, then gently nudged Xie Jinglan back to the inner chamber.

“It *is* chilly outside. Let’s go.”

With Xiahou Lian in the room, Xie Jinglan immediately felt much more at ease. The rain had stopped, and the darkness was quiet. He could hear Xiahou Lian’s breathing and the occasional rustle as the other boy turned in bed.

“Are you asleep, Shaoye?” Xiahou Lian asked softly.

“Not yet.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“If an official were caught forming a cabal, what kind of punishment would he face?”

“With friends come cliques. Scholars often don’t get along, and they’ll form alliances against each other based on their teacher or region. The Niu, Li, Zhe, Hui, and other factions were all the same. The severity of the punishment would depend on whom they’d allied with and what private interests they’d pursued.”

“Um...” Xiahou Lian pondered for a while, racking his brain for how to phrase his question.

“Whom they’d allied with”? He certainly couldn’t bring up Xie Bingfeng and his gang of cronies. *“What private interests they’d pursued”?*

There didn’t seem to be any evidence that particularly selfish interests were involved, just talk of tea tasting and painting appraisals alongside curses against the eunuch faction.

How was he supposed to phrase this? For the first time in his life, Xiahou Lian felt that he *should* probably have read more. That could at least have helped him hoodwink Xie Jinglan now.

“Could you give me some examples?” he hedged.

Xie Jinglan thought for a moment. “Are you familiar with the Partisan Prohibitions of the Han dynasty? Never mind—you probably aren’t. Grand Commandant Dou Wu allied with scholars and marched his troops into the palace to eliminate the eunuch Cao Jie and his faction. Cao Jie ended up capturing him instead. Scholars like Li Ying submitted petitions pleading their case, but Cao Jie falsely accused them of plotting a rebellion. Li Ying, Du Mi, Fan Pang, and other great scholars of the time were all executed, and over seven hundred people were implicated.”

Damn. That’s terrifying.

Xiahou Lian recalled the contents of Xie Bingfeng’s letters. There’d been no mention of anything like storming the palace, so their contents probably weren’t that serious. “What if the cabal was just drinking tea, admiring paintings, cursing the eunuchs, or calling a girl over to sing a few songs?”

“They’d just be a clique of literati. Even if their actions were held against them, they’d at most be told that officials shouldn’t solicit prostitutes and slapped with a fine. Then again…the eunuchs are notoriously petty. In the worst-case scenario, they might be accused of dereliction of duty.”

Xiahou Lian breathed a sigh of relief. There was no cause for worry; Xie Bingfeng didn’t seem to be in any real trouble.

Then Xie Jinglan asked, “Why are you asking about this all of a sudden?”

Xiahou Lian made up excuses. “No reason, just curious. What if I end up an official someday and need some allies or backers?”

“Pfft. Give up on *that* idea. You couldn’t even pass the entry exams. But with your brawn, you could probably become a constable.”

Xiahou Lian didn’t respond, and they plunged into silence. The moon peeked from behind the clouds, spilling silver rays across the room.

“Hey, Shaoye. Would you ever ally yourself with the eunuchs?” Xiahou Lian turned to look at Xie Jinglan.

For a moment, Xie Jinglan was taken aback. “Teacher said, ‘The world is full of hardship, but the heart must remain good.’ I would never become the eunuchs’ lackey. If push came to shove, and they caused some upheaval in the court, I might take a post outside the capital to help secure the peace. But when the chaos subsided, I’d return to the court to help stabilize the nation once more.”

“What if you found yourself in a desperate situation in which you had no other choice?”

“Life and death are up to fate. I can’t control whether I live or die, but I can at least choose the path I walk.”

Xie Jinglan wanted to say more, but when he turned his head, he saw that Xiahou Lian had grown still. All Xie Jinglan could hear was the sound of his steady breathing.

Xiahou Lian had actually nodded off.

Xie Jinglan turned over and gazed serenely at Xiahou Lian’s face. Moonlight filtered through the paper window, casting a gentle glow on his porcelain cheeks. He stared at the other boy for a long time before finally closing his eyes and drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 11:
The Rustle of Fallen Leaves

THE COLDEST DAYS HAD PASSED, and the weather gradually warmed. Bursts of chirping filled the air from time to time. In the mood for some entertainment, Dai Shengyan took Xie Jinglan and Xiahou Lian all over the city. One day, he held his class at a Confucian temple; another day, at Stone City; and the next, in Wuyi Alley.

Xie Jinglan had rarely left the house over the course of his short life. At most, he'd gone on rare outings to the city outskirts during the Qingming Festival. He'd never participated in the lantern releases on the river during the Mid-Autumn Festival. With Dai Shengyan's help, however, he now had the opportunity to explore Jinling's scenic beauty over just a few days. The gloom in his heart lifted, giving way to something much brighter.

With the protective Dai Shengyan and the unwaveringly cheerful Xiahou Lian as his companions, Xie Jinglan became much more outgoing. That transformation didn't escape Dai Shengyan's notice, and it left him quite pleased.

That said, Xiahou Lian was truly a bad influence. A few days earlier, Xie Jinglan had suddenly realized that he'd begun shaking his leg while reading and writing. Startled, he quickly corrected the habit, then began paying closer attention to his posture and movements. The thought of becoming as lax as Xiahou Lian terrified him.

As for Xiahou Lian, Dai Shengyan's approach suited him just fine. He had a natural aversion to sitting still and could never stay in one place for long. The moment he sat down, he'd urgently need to use the restroom or suddenly find himself thirsty. Before long, he'd vanish without a trace.

Even amiable Dai Shengyan couldn't take it any longer. Sighing helplessly, he said, "Xiao-Lian, you have to help me save face. I've already praised you to those around me. Over the past few days, I've received countless letters from friends congratulating me on finding such a promising disciple. They're even asking to read your essays. What am I supposed to tell them?"

“No one would want to read my chicken scratch. Why not just send them the young master’s essays and claim they’re mine? Then, after a while, you can just say, ‘Not all child prodigies grow up to be exceptional,’ and write an essay mourning my failings. That way, I can stop pretending to be a prodigy.”

Dai Shengyan laughed and shook his head. “Well, since you’ve already come up with a plan, I might as well use it.”

One day, Dai Shengyan took them to Zhuiyue Tower. The building was very tall, and from the top, they saw the city’s streets and houses spread out like a game board, surrounded by towering walls. In the distance loomed mist-shrouded mountains. Although Xie Jinglan had never been to Mount Tai, he now felt the same awe he would have felt standing atop it, gazing down on the world below.

However, Zhuiyue Tower was situated in the bustling heart of the city and faced the street. The crowds were deafening, peddlers and laborers jostling shoulder to shoulder.

Xie Jinglan frowned. “It’s so loud here. How am I supposed to concentrate on studying?”

“Today’s lesson is on our nation’s culture,” replied Dai Shengyan. “How can we understand that culture if we don’t mingle with the people?”

Xie Jinglan was expressionless. Was the old man just looking for an excuse to go have some fun, but feeling too embarrassed to leave his disciple behind?

Still, he reluctantly accepted Dai Shengyan’s logic. Just as he was about to ask Xiahou Lian to prepare his ink and brush, he turned to find the boy’s stool empty.

Haaah… Whatever. He considered Xiahou Lian hopeless anyway.

By noon, Dai Shengyan had finished his lecture. For a while, the pair sat polishing off a pot of tea, but they still saw no sign of Xiahou Lian.

Dai Shengyan shook his head. “It seems Xiao-Lian has lost interest in my horror stories.”

Xie Jinglan gritted his teeth and defended Xiahou Lian. “He’s just restless, and he loves to play. Please don’t take umbrage with him, sir.”

“Ha ha ha! Of course not. It’s a shame, though. The story I was going to tell today is a hundred times more exciting than the others. Not hearing it will be his loss.”

Xie Jinglan perked up. “Oh?”

Dai Shengyan stroked his beard, but he didn’t begin his story just yet.

Instead he asked, “Jinglan, have you ever heard of Qiye Garden?”

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THE LEAVES HAD LONG SINCE FALLEN, leaving behind bare branches that revealed glimpses of roofs, their tiles like the scales on a fish’s back. Xiahou Lian, who was used to moving around at great heights, swung from eaves and leapt across rooftops. Passersby occasionally spotted his monkey-like figure and shouted at him to come down, but when they did, Xiahou Lian had already disappeared among the rooftops and walls.

Tired from climbing, Xiahou Lian perched in an old locust tree and pulled some pastries from his pocket, ready for a break.

The tree’s throng of naked branches stretched over a small courtyard. Inside sat a small house, its doors and windows tightly shut. It appeared uninhabited.

Just as Xiahou Lian was about to bite into his pastry, the courtyard’s wooden gate creaked open. A man clad in a short-sleeved, pleated black garment cut through the shadows cast by the branches, then paused in the middle of the yard. Xiahou Lian could only see the back of his shirt, which was embroidered with a ferocious flying fish, its fangs bared and its eyes like copper bells.

An Eastern Depot agent?

The man looked around, then spoke to the air: “The eunuch has ordered the execution of Xie Bingfeng. Once his head is delivered, three hundred taels of gold will be paid in full.”

The name “Xie Bingfeng” struck Xiahou Lian like a thunderclap. He nearly choked on his pastry but quickly covered his mouth and forced it down.

From beneath the eaves appeared another figure in black robes. Xiahou Lian heard a strange, raspy voice, like the hiss of a snake or the screech of a saw against metal: “The rule of Qiye Garden is that good karma must come before a reward.”

The Garden! Xiahou Lian was stunned.

“Three hundred taels is no small sum. How can the eunuch be sure you’ll succeed?”

“A Qiye Garden assassin is an Asura, a butcher’s knife in the Buddha’s hand. Who can escape when a demon comes for their life? Even if you don’t believe in gods or Buddhas, you must believe in demons.”

“We’ll pay a hundred taels up front and the remainder after the deed is done.”

“Do you haggle like this when you pray at a temple?”

The agent sneered. “Do you really think you’re a Buddha? The eunuch is doing you a favor by hiring you. You’re already under observation by the Embroidered Uniform Guard. If the Eastern Depot steps in, I doubt you’ll be able to keep living such a carefree existence.”

The black-robed man made a calming gesture and said, “I never claimed to be a Buddha. The only Buddha in Qiye Garden is our abbot, known as the Shixin Buddha. We are all demons under his command.” He smirked mockingly. “We both know who it is the Embroidered Uniform Guard have captured. The Eastern Depot is no match for them.”

The agent’s expression darkened, and he snorted. “Fine. Call your Buddha out to speak with me.”

The man in black shook his head and smiled. “The abbot sits high above worldly matters. How could he dirty his hands with such trivialities? My time is limited. I’ll count to three. If we don’t have a deal by then, I’ll leave.” The man in black didn’t wait for the agent to respond as his lips began counting.

“One.”

The agent's mouth tightened, his expression hateful.

"Two," the man in black said leisurely.

The agent twitched the hand on his sword's hilt, as if he were about to speak.

"Three." The man in black sighed. "What a pity."

"Wait," the agent said. "Tomorrow at noon, come to the eastern city gate. The three hundred taels of gold will be placed in a coffin leaving the city."

The man in black smiled. "Qiye Garden has heard your wish."

The moment he finished speaking, a strong gust of wind blew past, pushing the pastry right out of Xiahou Lian's hand. Crumbs scattered everywhere, pelting the agent's face and hair. Panicked, Xiahou Lian tried to climb higher, but the agent shouted and fired a clawed weapon in his direction.

There wasn't time to dodge. The claw sank into Xiahou Lian's left shoulder, tearing into his flesh. Blood gushed forth as pain exploded through him. The agent yanked the rope tethered to the claw, and Xiahou Lian was pulled right out of the tree. He tumbled to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

He turned to see the man in black standing calmly under the eaves. A hood concealed his face, exposing only a pale chin. He made no move to help.

Fear gripped Xiahou Lian's heart, frost seemingly creeping up his spine. There was only one thought in his mind: *Run*.

In that moment, he understood what being an assassin truly meant. It wasn't about swift kills or hunting down targets—it was about living in death's constant shadow.

He struggled to his feet but couldn't break free from the claw. The agent drew his sword and advanced toward Xiahou Lian. The boy raised his right hand, gritting his teeth, and a hidden dart shot from his sleeve.

Suddenly, a thin, shimmering blade as delicate as a cicada's wing sliced through the air. It cut the dart in half and flew straight toward Xiahou Lian's chest.

The blade pierced his skin, cold metal sinking into his flesh. Warm blood spurted forth, yet the blade plunged no deeper—instead, it retracted into its hilt.

Xiahou Lian took the hint and collapsed to the ground, clutching the hilt of the blade. He bit his tongue, spat out some blood, and then lay still, playing dead masterfully.

“My apologies for the disturbance. That was one of Qiye Garden’s little demons. He probably came to steal some pastries and accidentally stumbled upon our transaction,” the man in black said with a polite smile. “But rules are rules. I’ve dealt with him. I hope Your Excellency is satisfied.”

“The Garden’s discipline is truly remarkable. You’d strike down even one of your own, and a child at that. Of course I’m satisfied—very much so,” the agent said with a mirthless smile. He glanced at the pastry crumbs scattered on the ground. It was true that no ordinary thief would eat while eavesdropping. Still, the current matter was grave, so he thought for a moment, then said, “Given what’s happened, let’s call off the deal. You needn’t come tomorrow.”

The man in black nodded. Then the agent left. Xiahou Lian waited a while to make sure he was really gone before standing up.

The man in black pulled back his hood, revealing Qiu Ye’s fair and delicate face. He looked at Xiahou Lian worriedly. “What am I going to do with you, you troublesome child?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose...” said Xiahou Lian feebly.

Qiu Ye carried Xiahou Lian into the house and bandaged his wounds. “What happened today stays between you and me,” he warned. “Don’t let anyone else know. You ruined an important deal and lost Qiye Garden three hundred taels of gold. The abbot planned to use that money to renovate the temple and improve the lives of everyone there. If he finds out, he’ll have you tied up and hauled back to the mountain for a whipping.”

When Qiu Ye mentioned the deal, Xiahou Lian struggled to sit up and asked, “Qiu-dage, are you going to kill Xie Bingfeng?”

Qiu Ye glanced at Xiahou Lian. It was not his typical gentle look; his expression carried an unyielding harshness that made Xiahou Lian swallow

the rest of his words.

“Xiao-Lian, you may look irresponsible, but I thought you still had some sense. Even someone as willful and impudent as your mother respects the Garden rules. Remember: Ask no questions and kill without restraint.”

Xiahou Lian lowered his head. “Understood...”

Still wrapping a bandage around him, Qiu Ye changed the subject. “My Qiushui is a family heirloom. If you become my disciple, I’ll pass Qiushui on to you. Think about it.”

Xiahou Lian didn’t reply.

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“OIYE GARDEN?” said Xie Jinglan. “Isn’t that the outlaw organization the government has been hunting in the jianghu? I heard that the imperial guards recently captured several of their assassins.”

Dai Shengyan shook his head and smiled. “Those were just small fry who caused trouble by using Qiye Garden’s name. True assassins of the Garden hide among common folk and even within the court and palace. They’re not so easy to catch. The Embroidered Uniform Guard needed to give a satisfactory report, so they went along with the charade.”

The confidence with which Dai Shengyan spoke led Xie Jinglan to a realization. “Sir, have you met a Qiye Garden assassin before?”

Dai Shengyan’s gaze wandered into the distance and out at the tiered buildings beyond the window. “I have. It was twelve years ago.”

Twelve years earlier, Dai Shengyan had been appointed as the magistrate of Jiangzhou Prefecture. Upon taking office, he followed protocol and visited the local prince living there. That particular prince was infamous for debauchery. At the time, the standards for people’s character and integrity were even harsher than today. Stories of loyal sons, virtuous grandsons, child prodigies, and virtuosos abounded, and news of remarkable figures popped up steadily in even the remotest villages.

However, the prince in question had earned a reputation for overindulging in food, drink, and entertainment. He managed to stand out among numerous renowned scholars and talents, which was no easy feat.

His hedonism reached the point of absurdity; even his residence was a den of drunkenness and lust, with spittoons shaped like the mouths of beautiful women. The people took to calling him the “Prince of Joy,” gradually forgetting his official title.

Dai Shengyan had navigated bureaucracy for many years and weathered his share of storms, yet the Prince of Joy’s extravagance still left him thunderstruck.

What shocked him wasn’t the prince’s decadence but his enormous girth. The Prince of Joy was like a small mountain of flesh. Approaching to offer him a toast, Dai Shengyan instinctively maintained a three-step distance. He’d feared that the prince might lose his balance and make Dai Shengyan the laughingstock of the nation—the new appointee crushed to death on his first day in office.

After three rounds of drinks, the Prince of Joy spoke first. “Magistrate Dai, I hear you have been widowed for years. You must not have found a suitable companion yet. My residence is full of beauties of all shapes and sizes. If you like any of them, feel free to take her with you. Consider it a small token of my goodwill.”

Dai Shengyan replied, “Although my late wife died young, I think of her constantly, and I carry her mementos with me always. I appreciate Your Highness’s kindness, but I have no intention of remarrying. I hope you understand.”

The Prince of Joy clearly didn’t believe Dai Shengyan. “There’s no one else here,” he whispered. “No need for such reservations. Your wife passed away so early, you probably never truly got to experience the pleasures of women.”

The prince smiled cryptically, and his two meaty cheeks rose, squeezing his already beady eyes into slits. Dai Shengyan’s heart skipped a beat; he sensed that something unpleasant was about to happen.

Music began to play, and two rows of songstresses entered, each holding an iron pipa and dressed only in thin gauze. The pipas just barely

allowed them modesty, exposing a hint of their tender breasts. Gentle candlelight spilled over their skin, imparting it with the lustrous glow of mutton-fat jade.

The songstresses began to dance, their graceful movements accompanied by the ethereal music flowing from their almost translucent fingers. These women had been raised in the prince's residence and trained by experts; every smile and gesture exuded just the right charm.

Dai Shengyan almost wanted to gouge out his own eyes.

He'd grown weary of the court's intrigues and requested a post outside the capital. Everyone had thought he was out of his mind to give up the capital's luxuries for the bamboo-filled backwater of Jiangzhou. But Dai Shengyan was a man who took pride in his integrity, and he'd laughed at them, deriding their shallowness. Hoping for a quiet, peaceful life, he'd packed his belongings and rushed to Jiangzhou.

He'd never imagined that the Prince of Joy would make him regret his decision almost immediately. He yearned to run right back to the capital and continue his daily spats with the old geezers there.

Covering his eyes, he said miserably, "Your Highness may not know this, but I am over the age of forty, and my health is not what it used to be. I can no longer…perform in bed."

He had no choice but to resort to that excuse to protect his reputation, hoping that the prince would let him off the hook.

The Prince of Joy widened his eyes in understanding, his expression a mixture of pity and regret. "How could this be? I had no idea. I've offended you, Magistrate. Please don't hold it against me. Leave, all of you! Quickly! Don't linger in the magistrate's sight!"

Dai Shengyan breathed a sigh of relief and clasped his hands, preparing to leave. But then the prince continued, "Even if you can't enjoy the company of beauties, there are other ways to indulge yourself."

"...This humble official will decline. Cultivating one's character is its own reward."

The Prince of Joy, assuming Dai Shengyan was still putting on airs and refusing to show his true self, clapped his hands. "Fetch my fragrant

wine!”

A servant brought out a jug of the beverage, and the prince personally poured Dai Shengyan a cup. As the stopper was removed, a rich aroma filled the room. The scent alone was enough to intoxicate Dai Shengyan.

Unable to resist, Dai Shengyan picked up the cup. “Truly excellent wine,” he sighed. “What is it called?”

“This wine is called ‘Fragrant to the Bone,’” the prince said with a proud smile. “Do you know how I vinted such a fine wine?”

“I dare not presume, Your Highness.”

“Most wines are made in the spring; I make mine in winter. The cold prevents fermentation, so I have women warm the wine with their bodies. The choice of a woman is crucial—she must be a stunning beauty, aged seventeen or eighteen. She sleeps with the wine jar every night; that’s the key to its richness and fragrance. Magistrate, why not assess it carefully to see whether the scent of the maiden’s body lingers?”

Dai Shengyan was dumbfounded. Reaching his limit, he declared, “Your Highness’s generosity is too much for me to bear. I feel unwell and cannot stay any longer. Farewell!”

“Hey! Why are you leaving so suddenly?”

Dai Shengyan stood to depart. As he rose, he thought he saw a faint figure in the curtains. From that fleeting glimpse, he couldn’t make out many details, but the figure’s cold gaze made a deep impression on him. Startled, he looked again, but nobody was there.

The Prince of Joy’s noisy voice again rang out: “Magistrate Dai, I still have many treasures to show you. It’s no fun enjoying them alone. The former magistrate, Mo Zhinian, was as dull as a block of wood. Why are you too so blind to the beauty of finer things?”

“Many treasures”?! At those words, fear raced through Dai Shengyan, and he hurried to leave. The Prince of Joy chased him, panting heavily. Despite his immense size, he was surprisingly swift, moving with small, quick steps. Dai Shengyan pulled up his robes and ran, terrified of being caught.

A procession of servants pursued them, shouting, “Your Highness, slow down!”

The night was dark, with only flickering lanterns to light the way. A servant at the end of the procession was about to shout as well when he felt a tap on his back. He turned in confusion, only for a light to flash and a bloody gash to open on his throat. The lantern in his hand fell to the ground, and the candle rolled out, igniting a small patch of flames.

As the servants ahead heard the noise and turned around, a shadow swiftly passed them. In an instant, all were silenced. The servant in front continued his chase, but still he was unable to catch up. He held his side and panted heavily until he suddenly realized that the people behind him had disappeared.

“Huh? Where did everyone go?” His surroundings were silent and dark; the only light came from his lantern. He leaned against the cold brick wall, unease creeping into his heart, and took a few steps back.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his chest. He looked down to see a bloodstained blade protruding from it.

A few hundred steps ahead, the Prince of Joy wiped sweat from his forehead and cursed Dai Shengyan. “You ungrateful man!”

“Your Highness, why must you be so unrelenting?” Dai Shengyan retorted. “I’ll submit my resignation tomorrow and return home to become a farmer. Isn’t that enough?”

“You…! You…! I prepare a grand feast, and you show no appreciation! What have you reduced my hospitality to?”

“I didn’t reduce it to anything! Just keep it away from me!”

The Prince of Joy was seeing red. He took several deep breaths to calm himself. “Fine, fine. I won’t waste my time with a fool like you.” He turned to the servant who’d caught up to them. “You. Come help me back to the palace. Ugh…I’m exhausted.”

The servant stood unmoving in the shadows by the wall.

The Prince of Joy was furious. “Are you deaf? Come here and help me!”

The servant chuckled softly. A cold gleam flashed as they pulled something from their waistband. Dai Shengyan and the prince instinctively shielded their eyes with their hands.

What was that? It was so bright. Could it be...?

Dai Shengyan suddenly realized that it was a blade. The servant had drawn a saber!

This was no member of the prince’s household—this was an assassin!

Chapter 12:
The Reaper of Souls

"YOUR HIGHNESS, run!"

"What?" The Prince of Joy was still confused, so Dai Shengyan wrenched him forward, making him stumble.

The assassin approached slowly. They scraped their blade against the brick wall with an earsplitting screech, sparks flying.

"Y-you… Who are you?" The Prince of Joy pointed at the assassin, his voice trembling.

The assassin's only reply was a low, eerie chuckle. The sound was soft, little more than a murmur. Yet, as it spilled forth, it seemed to reverberate until the air itself laughed alongside the figure. The prince and Dai Shengyan both felt their scalps prickle with terror.

The Prince of Joy scrambled to his feet and ran with Dai Shengyan close behind. They turned several corners, and the assassin's laughter gradually faded. Only when they no longer heard it did they dare stop, leaning against a wall to catch their breath.

"Was that a person or a ghost?" the Prince of Joy panted.

Dai Shengyan cautiously peeked around the corner to see whether the assassin was following them. The dim light revealed nothing in the darkness ahead; the assassin might emerge from that darkness at any moment.

Pulling back, Dai Shengyan said, "There's no such thing as ghosts. It must be someone's trick. We didn't realize it while we were fleeing, but we've run quite far from the residence now. Let's hurry to the county office and get help."

"Good idea." The Prince of Joy struggled to stand. "But I'm exhausted. Let me rest for a moment."

The prince suddenly froze, his head lowered.

Noticing his stillness, Dai Shengyan asked, “What’s wrong?”

The Prince of Joy trembled as he pointed to the ground, voice quivering. “Look… Does that shadow have three heads?”

Dai Shengyan peered downward. On the ground was a massive shadow—the prince’s—and a thinner one—his own. But between them was an additional smaller shadow, as if a third head had sprouted from their shoulders.

They slowly raised their eyes, coming face-to-face with an expressionless visage. It stared at them, then slowly grinned, revealing gleaming white teeth.

“Ahhhhh!”

The prince and Dai Shengyan screamed in terror, scrambling away from the tree.

The assassin flipped down from the wall, landing gracefully on the ground. They raised their head, and their lips curved into a malicious smile.

“I am the Garuda of Qiye Garden, come to send Your Highness to paradise.”

The voice was low and genderless, like the whisper of a ghost from an ancient wasteland—hoarse yet clear, as if simultaneously echoing from afar and speaking right by their ears.

Their surroundings were pitch-black but for a few lanterns hung on the walls. Resembling a demon lurking in the darkness, the assassin called the Garuda stepped closer.

One step. Two steps. Three steps…

“Stay back! Stay back!” Dai Shengyan and the Prince of Joy stumbled backward in unison.

The Garuda reached the edge of the darkness, their body now bathed in moonlight below the shoulders. Clad in black robes, they stood as straight as a crane. As the darkness receded to the contours of the assassin’s face, a shimmering blade flashed like water. The black shadow darted owlishly between Dai Shengyan and the prince. In that moment, they seemed to hear rippling water. Then something warm and sticky splashed their faces.

Numb, Dai Shengyan turned around to glimpse the cold, long saber first. On its blade were inscribed the characters *Hengbo* in seal script. His eyes traveled up the blade, landing on the Prince of Joy's horrified face—and the crimson gash across his neck.

Blood splattered, staining Dai Shengyan's cheek.

Before him, the Garuda maintained a malicious smile. Bright-red blood stained their lips, bringing with it cruel beauty.

As Dai Shengyan stumbled backward in terror, he finally got a clear look at the Garuda. She was a woman of striking beauty despite the sharply arched eyebrows that gave her a fierce, murderous air. Her beauty was wild, like a leopard's, sending a shiver down his spine.

In that instant, Dai Shengyan made a decision. Holding his breath, he lunged forward, drew a sword from the prince's side, and thrust it at the Garuda.

The sword was adorned with jewels, its blade polished and reflective. It suited the Prince of Joy's style perfectly, but as soon as Dai Shengyan drew it, he knew that he was doomed—the blade's edge was unsharpened. Dai Shengyan had studied swordplay in his youth, never neglecting it despite his scholarly pursuits, yet even a grandmaster of the sword would be helpless now.

But so what?

Pouring all his strength into the thrust, he charged forward like a moth to a flame.

Even if there was only a sliver of hope, he had to fight!

A blink later, the blade shone like frost, shedding its jeweled splendor as it sliced through the darkness. The Garuda raised an eyebrow and met the sword with her saber. With a flick of her wrist, her water-like blade slid along Dai Shengyan's to just below his hand, leaving a long, shallow cut.

Dai Shengyan's wrist throbbed in pain, and his sword clattered to the ground.

The Garuda sneered. "Does every scholar have a death wish?"

Dai Shengyan closed his eyes and sighed. "I am no match for you. Do as you will."

The Garuda tapped Dai Shengyan's cheek with her saber. "Aren't you going to beg for your life, old man? You could claim to have a large family depending on you, a hundred mouths to feed. Maybe then I'd… Fine, I still wouldn't let you go."

Dai Shengyan forced a dry laugh, humoring her. "Before I die, I have one question: Why did you assassinate the prince?"

The Garuda stroked her chin. "Hmm. I suppose there's no harm in telling you now." She kicked the Prince of Joy's rotund corpse. "Anytime this scoundrel had nothing better to do, he went around snatching women off the streets. All the beautiful girls within a few hundred miles of Jiangzhou ended up in his residence. The women were sold into slavery, and the men couldn't find good wives. The men were furious, the women resentful. Isn't that reason enough to despise him?"

Dai Shengyan sighed. "The world is unjust, but killing is also unjust. Though he lived hedonistically, he never took a life. What you've done isn't justice but a crime."

"Justice?" The Garuda laughed. "I was paid to do this. It wasn't about justice; it was about money."

That stunned Dai Shengyan into silence.

"But is killing truly the greatest evil? If he could treat beautiful women as playthings, then I can treat humans as ants. Where is the injustice in that?" She looked down at the prince's corpse. Despite the wicked smile curving her lips, she resembled a temple statue watching from above, her gaze cold and emotionless.

Dai Shengyan suddenly understood. He straightened his robes and closed his eyes, ready to meet his end. "Do it."

He stretched out his neck so that it resembled the throat of an old duck pulled over a chopping block. His thin body didn't fill out his voluminous robes—they fluttered emptily in the wind, making him look like a scarecrow. It was somewhat comical.

The Garuda laughed again, the coldness in her eyes vanishing in an instant. "Well, actually, your death isn't set in stone. I happen to have a favor to ask of you."

“I won’t do anything evil.”

“I know, I know,” the Garuda replied. “Here’s the thing. I, uh, made a little mistake and ended up with a child.”

She said this as casually as if she were talking about picking up a stray dog on the roadside—and not a particularly welcome one. Dai Shengyan’s mouth twitched, but he said nothing.

“I haven’t read much, so I’ve been struggling for months to come up with a good name. They say you’re a great scholar, second only to Confucius, Mencius, and Zhu Xi.” The Garuda pulled a piece of paper from her robe and handed it to Dai Shengyan. “This is my son’s birth chart. Look it over, divine the trigrams and five elements or whatever, and then come up with a good name. If you do, I’ll let you go. I’ve always respected scholars. It seems like a fair deal, doesn’t it?”

Dai Shengyan shook his head. “My knowledge of divination notwithstanding, you’re an outlaw, and I’m an official. Even if you spare my life, I’ll have to post wanted signs with your portrait on the city walls tomorrow. There’s no way around it, so just get it over with.”

“Why’re you so stubborn? Ah, forget it. Post them if you must. Do you really think you and all those useless government officials can catch me?” The Garuda stuffed the birth chart into Dai Shengyan’s hand, then poked his shoulder with her saber. “Hurry up. I don’t have much time.”

Dai Shengyan took a deep breath, suppressing the storm of indescribable emotions in his heart.

The Garuda had been ruthless and cold when killing, but she was otherwise carefree and flippant. In all his years, Dai Shengyan had never met anyone like her.

Perhaps all those who rolled around in mountains of corpses and seas of blood were a bit twisted.

Glancing at the yellow paper in his hand and the Hengbo saber resting on his shoulder, he thought for a moment. “How about a single character for his name? ‘Lian,’ as in ‘Amid the vast green wilderness, a shadow falls between the rippling waves.’ That pairs well with your saber’s name, ‘Great Waves.’”

“A shadow falls between the rippling waves,” the Garuda muttered a few times, and her lips curved into a satisfied smile. The unconcealable wickedness in her eyes tinged her seemingly kind smile with malice and mischief.

Dai Shengyan clutched his pounding chest and shrank back.

“Not bad, not bad,” the Garuda declared. “That’s the name, then. Thanks!”

She sheathed her saber and walked away, waving. Dai Shengyan remained standing where he was, watching as the assassin disappeared into the darkness.

He never saw the assassin again. But the Garuda, who had already risen to fame, became the government’s most wanted criminal. Still, for twelve years, no one knew her whereabouts. All they knew was that, wherever she went, someone inevitably fell to her Hengbo saber.

Her blade became Qiye Garden’s deadliest weapon. When people discussed the Garden, everyone already knew about the Garuda.

A chill ran through Xie Jinglan’s body—not because he was shocked by this tale of the Garuda, but because of the name Dai Shengyan had personally chosen: Lian.

He recalled Xiahou Lian’s dagger and hidden darts, as well as his comments about his unreliable yet virtuosic mother. A terrifying thought crossed his mind, startling him so deeply that his hands and feet went cold.

It wasn’t that Xie Jinglan had never heard of Qiye Garden assassins. After all, tales of assassins were often used to scare children in the streets and alleys; even Aunt Lan used to frighten him with such stories. However, he’d always thought such stories were old wives’ tales or part of the warbling lyrics of an opera.

He’d never suspected that a real assassin was right at his side.

For a long time, his mind flicked between his companion Xiahou Lian and his image of an assassin; he couldn’t reconcile the two. He could buy that Xiahou Lian had been a street urchin, a smooth-talking thief, or a wild child running feral through the mountains, but he simply couldn’t believe that he was a cold-blooded assassin.

He recalled Xiahou Lian’s typical antics—catching birds, teasing dogs, and playing with cats—then pictured a sprawled-out Xiahou Lian drooling in his sleep. Conflicting emotions bubbled within him. *If every*

assassin is as stupid as Xiahou Lian, maybe Qiye Garden isn't that scary after all.

The government officials really were useless.

Dai Shengyan didn't notice Xie Jinglan's unease. He gazed out the window at the misty mountains and rivers, then sighed faintly.

Just then, a servant rushed in and approached Xie Jinglan. "San-shaoye, Xiahou Lian fell while climbing a building and got a shard of wood in his shoulder. He's just been brought back to the manor."

Xie Jinglan shot to his feet. "What did you say?!"

He hastily returned to Qiuwu Courtyard, where he pushed open the door to the side room and saw Xiahou Lian lying on the bed, groaning. The boy's shoulder was wrapped in layers of bandages, and bloodstained gauze swathed half his body.

Xie Jinglan was somewhat reassured to see that Xiahou Lian still had at least enough energy to groan. He sat next to the bed and said with just a hint of smugness, "You should've cracked your skull open too. Maybe next time you'll think twice before climbing the walls and roofs."

The physician was still there. Xie Jinglan turned toward them and cautiously inquired about Xiahou Lian's injuries. After confirming that he would fully recover with some rest, Xie Jinglan asked Aunt Lan to escort the doctor out.

"Thank goodness the steward was kind enough to call a renowned physician from Miaoshan Hall," Lianxiang said from Xiahou Lian's bedside. "Otherwise, considering your status and Shaoye being out of favor, you'd have been quickly bandaged at best. Who knows what complications might've arisen?"

Xiahou Lian, desperate to tell Xie Jinglan what he'd overheard, paid little attention to Lianxiang's words. He struggled to sit up, then grabbed Xie Jinglan's hand.

"What are you doing? Careful, or you'll reopen your wound," Lianxiang scolded him.

"Shaoye," Xiahou Lian said, "while I was wandering outside, I overheard thieves plotting to steal from the manor. I think they even

mentioned murder! You should warn the lord to start being warier."

"You got yourself hurt just to eavesdrop on thieves?" Xie Jinglan asked.

"Well…something like that."

"Let them steal if they wish," Xie Jinglan said. "Qiuwu Courtyard has nothing other than pots, pans, and books. They won't get anything valuable from us. Was this really worth getting hurt over?"

"But I heard them talk about murder. I'm worried that something might happen to the lord..."

Xie Jinglan cut him off. "If he dies, he dies. He's just a figurehead. All he's good for is writing poems and chasing empty fame. If someone more competent takes over his position, the thieves might even have done a good deed."

"Oh dear!" cried Lianxiang, quickly closing the doors and windows. "Don't say such things, Shaoye. And be careful—someone could hear you!"

Xiahou Lian was lost for words. After a while, he added, "If the lord dies, you'll be an orphan."

"Am I not an orphan already?" Xie Jinglan asked indifferently.

Xiahou Lian forced a dry laugh. "I guess so." His face was as pale as paper. Exhausted from talking, he closed his eyes to rest.

Xie Jinglan looked at him, then brushed a strand of hair from his cheek. The boy had gotten hurt because of him.

Feeling indescribable warmth in his heart, Xie Jinglan unconsciously softened his tone. "Take care of yourself, Xiahou Lian. Don't worry about my affairs. I'm the lord, and you're my servant. Your only job is to serve me well. Leave the rest to me."

Chapter 13:
Seven Fifteen

XIAHOU LIAN ATE AND SLEPT, slept and ate, virtually living the life of a pampered young master.

Each courtyard was its own little world. Not only was Xiahou Lian injured, Xie Jinglan was indulging him; as long as that continued, no one would object to Xiahou Lian's behavior, no matter how domineering he became. During his convalescence, he acted more like a young master than the actual young master himself.

Xie Jinglan didn't completely ignore the threat to the Xie family Xiahou Lian had reported. He had Lianxiang tell the steward to be cautious and tighten the manor's security. With that, however, he closed his door to focus on his studies. He assumed the steward would handle the matter; there was no need for children like himself and Xiahou Lian to worry.

After a couple weeks, Xiahou Lian's wound had mostly scabbed over. He spent his days lounging in bed, occasionally wandering into Xie Jinglan's room to disrupt his studying. Fortunately, thanks to his training at Zhuiyue Tower, Xie Jinglan had developed the ability to tune out noises. Thus, he paid no attention to Xiahou Lian's chatter.

When Xie Jinglan did engage, he subtly probed about Xiahou Lian's former life. Mentally replacing all mentions of "thieves" or "bandits" in their conversations with "assassins," he pieced together something close to the truth.

Xiahou Lian's stories were exciting at first, but over time, they became extraordinarily dull.

Most people imagined Qiye Garden as a place of indulgence, where assassins drank fine wine, embraced beautiful women, and sang all night, their bloodstained blades resting among the flowers. In reality, the assassins lived on a remote mountain with a laughably quaint name. The Garden's leader was an ancient monk on the verge of death who guarded a dilapidated temple. The supposedly fearsome Garuda, meanwhile, spent her

days chasing her troublesome son across the mountain and begging neighbors for rice to feed them.

The assassins had all been forced to ingest a poison called “Seven Fifteen.” Once a year, they had to take an antidote, or they would suffer an excruciating death on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. Each winter, when snow sealed off the mountain, the assassins gathered in the crumbling temple, holding cups of hot tea. There, they listened to the abbot recite scriptures longer and more torturous than an old woman’s foot-binding cloth. After, each assassin reported how many heads they’d taken that year and received their annual dose of the antidote from a communal alms bowl.

Every year, some faces disappeared, never to return to the mountain. The bodies of those assassins rotted out in the mud like dead fish in salt. No one would speak their names again, and new assassins quickly replaced them. Although he usually fell asleep halfway through the abbot’s lengthy scripture recitation, Xiahou Lian had always thought that it was meant as a prayer for those lost souls.

His mother was often away, leaving him to roam the mountains like a wild monkey. He invented all sorts of bizarre contraptions, making ammunition from bird droppings or caltrops from wood, and if he hit one of the mountain’s assassins by mistake, they’d catch and beat him. Thus, Xiahou Lian developed a thick skin.

Few assassins stayed on the mountain year-round. The only permanent resident was the old monk, and that old geezer never spoke plainly, only mumbled scriptures. When Xiahou Lian misbehaved too much, Uncle Duan sometimes dragged him to the temple and forced him to sit beneath the Buddha statue while the abbot droned on. It was pure torture.

More often, though, Xiahou Lian lay alone in the woods, lost in thought. He’d raided every bird’s nest and waded through every stream on the mountain, and its creatures were wise to his antics. Knowing what a terror he was, birds and beasts vanished wherever he went.

Surrounded by endless mountainside, the ceaseless rustling of pines, and the empty huts of the assassins, Xiahou Lian would sit on the steps of Qiye Garden, fighting off sleep as the old monk mumbled endlessly. In those circumstances, he had no alternative but to retell himself the stories

he’d learned in Qiye Garden and wander the familiar mountain paths day after day.

In a way, Xie Jinglan was his first friend.

“Aren’t any paths available to you beyond taking up the family business and wandering the jianghu?” Xie Jinglan asked him.

“People like us have only two paths from birth: We follow our elders into the jianghu or grow old on the mountain,” Xiahou Lian replied, poking at the charcoal in the brazier. “And since I don’t want to be trapped on the mountain for the rest of my life, I have to learn the trade.”

“The old monk’s really that powerful? He can hold that many of you hostage?”

Not wanting to explain what “Seven Fifteen” was, Xiahou Lian just sighed. “Yes. Not even my mother could defeat him.”

Sunlight filtered through the carved window frame, casting intricate patterns on Xiahou Lian’s body. Half his face was in shadow, his eyes downcast as his right hand occasionally stirred the charcoal.

Apparently, even someone as carefree as Xiahou Lian had moments of melancholy.

“I really envy you, Jinglan-shaoye,” Xiahou Lian said softly. “Do you remember once asking me why I was helping you?”

The question took Xie Jinglan aback.

“It’s because I’m destined not to have a future.” Xiahou Lian looked up, his eyes sparkling with faint amusement. “But you’ll have one. Studying, becoming an official, improving yourself, managing your family, and bringing peace to the nation—you could leave a legacy for the ages and be celebrated for generations. That’s amazing!”

He and Xie Jinglan were on completely different paths—one leading to darkness, the other to glory.

Xie Jinglan felt a faint sting in his heart, as if tiny needles were pricking it. He opened his mouth. “I…”

Did he really want that?

In the beginning, he'd studied in order to make the Xie family kneel in regret someday. Under Dai Shengyan's guidance, he'd abandoned that petty ambition. But even now, what he cared most about wasn't the bustling masses in the streets; they were too distant, too numerous, and his heart was too small and shallow. It could only hold a few things.

"I am going to save you, Xiahou Lian. When I rise to power, you'll be free. However strong your boss is, he can't defeat an entire army."

Xiahou Lian stopped poking the charcoal and scratched his head sheepishly. "When you put it like that, it almost sounds like I'm some stunning beauty, and you're mobilizing the entire nation's troops to win my hand."

Xie Jinglan had been nervous, expecting Xiahou Lian to mock his overconfidence. After all, how could he be sure he'd someday rise to power? Even if he did, could Xiahou Lian wait that long? But Xiahou Lian, uneducated and full of tales about scholars and beauties, generals and princesses, had turned the conversation absurd.

Xie Jinglan glanced at Xiahou Lian. "Your looks aren't so bad. You could pull it off."

Time flew by, and soon it was spring. Xiahou Lian stood in a basin, stamping on Xie Jinglan's undergarments, his sleeves and trouser legs rolled up to reveal slender limbs. At twelve years old, he was sturdy and full of youthful energy. Still, he'd been washing for a while; his hair was damp with sweat and stuck to his cheeks.

Xiahou Lian didn't dare stamp for too long. If Xie Jinglan caught him washing clothes this way, he'd be furious. Ever since that "pants-wetting" incident, Xie Jinglan had refused to let Aunt Lan or Lianxiang wash his undergarments. Since Xiahou Lian already knew that secret, Xie Jinglan simply tossed the dirty garments to him instead.

After finally finishing the laundry, Xiahou Lian hung the clothes on the line, cleaned himself up, and headed to the library to fetch Xie Jinglan. Dai Shengyan had gone to Mochou Lake for a few days, so Xie Jinglan had been studying in the library on his own. There would be a temple fair that evening, and Xiahou Lian had been begging Xie Jinglan to sneak out with him to see the lanterns.

Xie Jinglan was buried in a pile of books at the pearwood desk, wearing a light-pink jacket that made his pale skin look like white jade. Despite that, his frail frame gave him a sickly appearance, as if he were a paper doll that the wind could sweep away.

“Shaoye!” Xiahou Lian called. Xie Jinglan looked up and gave him a fleeting glance. His beauty was almost otherworldly, and even a glance from him was captivating. Mentally, Xiahou Lian stuck out his tongue and coined a new nickname for the other boy: *Princess Jinglan.*

Xiahou Lian helped tidy and shelve the boxes of books, then handed Xie Jinglan a set of servant’s clothes. This wasn’t their first time absconding. Xiahou Lian had a knack for leading people astray; he’d even persuaded Lianxiang to sneak out with him once, but she’d spent the entire time at a cosmetics shop. Xiahou Lian had vowed never to take her out again.

“Only an hour,” Xie Jinglan warned.

Xiahou Lian nodded eagerly. “Deal!”

They took a shortcut, scaling two walls before finally reaching the alley outside the manor. As they were about to exit the alley, a sharp voice called out from behind, “Where do you think you’re going, San-shaoye?”

Hearts sinking, they both froze and slowly turned around to see the plump face of Matron Liu, her narrow eyes glaring coldly at them.

“I’ve caught you at last. You’ve been far too bold. If I weren’t keeping an eye on you, the mistress would never know how daring you’ve become.”

Xiahou Lian berated himself for failing to keep an eye on the matron. Xie Jinglan normally stayed late at the library, which was itself relatively secluded from the rest of the manor, so few people visited it. Their plan had been to sneak out to see the lanterns while everyone assumed they were still there studying, but now Matron Liu had caught them.

Xiahou Lian stepped forward. “The idea of sneaking out was entirely mine. If you must punish someone, punish me!”

Xie Jinglan grabbed Xiahou Lian’s wrist. “Xiahou Lian, you’re speaking out of turn! Matron Liu, there’s no need to say any more. If the

mistress wishes to punish us, so be it."

Matron Liu didn't let either boy off, escorting both to the main hall. The moon hung over the willow trees, and the lit lanterns cast a dim glow, which did little to dispel the heavy shadows below the rafters and pillars. Inside, Lady Xiao and Xie Bingfeng sat at the head of the room. The shadows obscured Xie Bingfeng's face, obfuscating his expression.

Xie Jinglan knelt and bowed his head. "I've come to confess my wrongdoings, Father."

Xie Bingfeng's voice was disappointed. "I thought you were a good and studious child, but it seems you're just as unruly as the rest. Where were you planning to go?"

"To the temple fair," Xie Jinglan said meekly, his face the picture of chastened obedience. "I know I was wrong. Please punish me severely. I won't do it again."

Watching his son's meek and docile apology, Xie Bingfeng relented. "Fine. You're young, and it's normal to want to play. Go back to the library and study hard. I'll let it go this time."

Xie Jinglan bowed again and was about to leave when Lady Xiao spoke up. "Wait, my lord. Our Jinglan has always been diligent. You're rarely home, so you wouldn't know, but I've seen how hard he studies. He's never done anything like sneaking out to a temple fair before. Someone must've led him astray."

Xie Bingfeng's gaze shifted to Xiahou Lian, his eyes filling with anger. "Xiahou Lian, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Before Xiahou Lian could speak, Xie Jinglan interjected, "Father, Xiahou Lian did mention the temple fair to me, but it was my decision to go. I've always wanted to go to festivals, but the mistress kept me home out of concern for my health. Still, I wished very much to go but was too afraid to ask. That's why, today, I made the foolish decision to sneak out. I know I was wrong. Punish me if you must."

Xie Bingfeng glanced at Lady Xiao and coughed. "Your mother meant well. If you wanted to go, you should just have asked. We wouldn't have kept you confined."

Lady Xiao, caught off guard, was furious. She cast a meaningful look at Matron Liu, who stepped forward.

“My lord, there’s something else you don’t know,” Matron Liu said cryptically.

Xie Bingfeng frowned. “Speak plainly. We don’t tolerate nonsense here.”

Matron Liu replied quickly, “Xiahou Lian not only encouraged the young master to go to the temple fair but also took him to listen to songs at the Wanxiang Tower brothel. Who knows how much money they spent? The young master was always well-behaved, but Xiahou Lian has been using up his monthly allowance. Just the other day, while cleaning the young master’s bed, I found…”

Xie Bingfeng tamped down on his anger. “Found what?”

Matron Liu pretended to hesitate. “I found a handkerchief embroidered with words—something about ‘your heart’ and ‘bedrock.’”[12] She sighed. “I’ve never read or studied, so I don’t know what they meant.”

Lady Xiao covered her crimson lips with a fan, her eyes gleaming with predatory delight. “My lord, just look at this Xiahou Lian. He’s a true scourge. He not only refuses to study, he’s also leading Jinglan astray.”

“You’re lying!” Xiahou Lian shouted. “I’ve never been to Wanxiang Tower!”

“If you don’t believe me,” said Matron Liu, “search his room for leftover money. And search the young master’s person. He carries that handkerchief with him daily.”

“Father,” said Xie Jinglan, “we’ve never been to Wanxiang Tower, and the only person who cleans my room is Xiahou Lian. When did Matron Liu ever set foot inside it? She’s lying. You can summon the servants from Qiuwu Courtyard to confirm that.”

Xie Jinglan was starting to panic. *Damn it*, he thought. Lady Xiao was clearly after Xiahou Lian. Xiahou Lian had spent his entire monthly allowance on snacks, so how could he have money left? Matron Liu must have planted the handkerchief somehow, so they absolutely couldn’t let themselves be searched.

And how come she brought up Wanxiang Tower? There were countless brothels along Jinling's Qinhuai River. Why fixate on Wanxiang Tower?

Lady Xiao raised her voice. "We'll question the servants but check you as well. Servants, search them!"

Maids immediately stepped forward and began thoroughly searching Xie Jinglan. In the course of doing so, one maid reached into the lining of his jacket and pulled out a bright-red handkerchief. To the onlookers, she appeared to have taken it from near Xie Jinglan's chest, though it had really been hidden in the jacket's lining.

At the sight of the handkerchief, Xie Jinglan and Xiahou Lian went pale.

Lady Xiao feigned sorrow. "You're so young, and you've already picked up such vile habits. Whatever will become of you? Xiahou Lian, Dai-xiansheng freed you from servitude and took you in. The lord has even allowed you to stay by the third young master's side as a schoolmate. And this is how you repay us? By leading the young master astray? What were you thinking?!"

Xiahou Lian was speechless. He could only panic silently.

Xie Bingfeng took the red handkerchief, the overwhelming scent of perfume nearly making him sneeze. In the corner was a short poem, signed *Liu Xiangnu*. The sight made his blood boil.

Liu Xiangnu was the full pseudonym of Lady Liu, Wanxiang Tower's top courtesan. She was notoriously selective and rarely entertained guests. Even Xie Bingfeng had gone to considerable effort composing countless poems in the hopes of winning her favor. He also had a handkerchief embroidered with her name, though the poem on his read, *May I be the star, and you the moon, shining brightly together every night*.[13]

Was Lady Liu mass-producing such handkerchiefs? Handing them out to every patron, each with a different poem?

Xie Bingfeng didn't know whether to be angrier at Xie Jinglan for visiting brothels at such a young age, at Lady Liu for her mass-produced handkerchiefs, or at the knowledge that he and his son had unwittingly

shared the same courtesan. He picked up a teacup and hurled it at Xie Jinglan, drenching him in tea. The cup shattered against the floor.

The room fell silent. Xie Bingfeng threw the handkerchief to the ground. “You little brat! What have you done?!” he roared. “Why do you have Lady Liu’s handkerchief?”

Though the teacup had struck Xie Jinglan, he remained expressionless. He picked up the handkerchief, examined it, and tossed it back to the ground. “This handkerchief isn’t mine.”

Xiahou Lian leaned in to look as well. Seeing the name “Liu Xiangnu” in the corner, his expression grew complicated.

Lady Xiao fixed her hair and sighed. “Remember how grand the Xie family’s gathering at Yanbo Lake was, my lord? Yet only this boy caught Dai-xiansheng’s eye. You thought the Xie family had finally produced a promising seedling, someone to bring more glory to our ancestors. But in the end, he’s still young and easily led astray.” Glancing at Xiahou Lian, she added, “This matter mustn’t reach your friends, or they’ll mock us.”

Xie Bingfeng had always valued his reputation over his life. Even if his insides were rotten, he could gild them with a gold-and-jade veneer. Dai Shengyan’s recognition of Xie Jinglan had initially brought Xie Bingfeng great pride; scholars and the literati praised him as a “mighty father who begot a talented son” and lauded the Xie family as “the epitome of scholarly refinement.” The emptier the pretenses that propped up his reputation, the more fiercely he guarded it. He was now accustomed to chasing fame and prestige, and he would not tolerate those things being even slightly blemished.

In a fit of rage, he pointed at Xie Jinglan and shouted, “You’re a disgrace to the family! This filthy thing was found on your person, and still you dare to deny your actions? If this handkerchief isn’t yours, it must belong to that *wonderful* schoolmate of yours! I raised you, and this is how you repay me? By engaging in such despicable behavior?!”

Seeing Xie Jinglan expressionless and unmoving, Lady Xiao felt a surge of loathing and added fuel to the fire. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. If the hen falls short, how can the egg be any better?”

Xie Jinglan suddenly looked up, glaring at Lady Xiao.

Xie Bingfeng coughed awkwardly. “What does this have to do with his mother?”

“What? I can’t bring her up?” Lady Xiao sneered. “You were the one who got drunk and lost your wits. Not only did you sire this disgraceful brat, you were demoted three ranks, and your once-promising future was ruined. You reap what you sow.”

“How many times have I told you not to speak of that despicable woman?” Xie Bingfeng said impatiently. As soon as the words left his mouth, he remembered that Xie Jinglan was still present. He glanced at his son, whose head hung low, revealing a hint of pale chin identical to his mother’s. He quickly suppressed his flicker of fresh guilt, and irritation crept like vines through his heart. He closed his eyes. “Enough. Xie Jinglan, go kneel in the ancestral hall and reflect on your actions. From now on, you’re confined to the courtyard. You may not leave except to attend Dai-xiansheng’s lessons. As for Xiahou Lian, the Xie family can no longer risk keeping you. When Dai-xiansheng returns, he can take you away!”

Unable to hold back any longer, Xiahou Lian retorted angrily, “The dead are gone, yet you’re still so spiteful toward them. How can you call your family prestigious?!”

“You brat!” Xie Bingfeng roared. “Who gave you permission to speak?”

Inwardly, Xiahou Lian spat. Then he glanced at Xie Jinglan. Kneeling behind him, Xiahou Lian could only see his back.

Xie Jinglan’s head was still bowed. His pale face was hidden in shadow, his expression inscrutable. He could hear the servants whisper around him, their voices like the rustle of an insect’s fine wings as it moved across a table. The candle on the table flickered with a popping sound, and the shadows on the floor swayed. Beyond the wall, the night watchman struck his temple block, each thud echoing in Xie Jinglan’s dully throbbing heart.

Suddenly, Xie Jinglan spoke. His voice was soft, but everyone heard it clearly.

“The handkerchief isn’t mine.”

“Oh? You’re saying it belongs to Xiahou Lian?” Lady Xiao’s red lips curled as she smiled.

Lifting his head slowly, Xie Jinglan stared directly at Lady Xiao. His eyes were dark and shadowed, and for a moment, Lady Xiao thought she saw something demonic lurking within them.

“If I’m not mistaken, it belongs to Xie Jingtao, your son.”

Chapter 14:
A Sleepless Night

XIE JINGTAO?

Xiahou Lian was somewhat puzzled. How could Xie Jinglan tell? He picked up the handkerchief, and its strong fragrance hit him. The scent was familiar, as if he'd smelled it somewhere before. Suddenly, it dawned on him.

"That's right," he said quickly. "If the lord summons the eldest young master, the truth will become clear."

Lady Xiao's expression darkened. "What more is there to say?" she demanded. "Someone take away this brat who corrupted the third young master. Dai-xiansheng can take Xiahou Lian back when he returns. From now on, he's forbidden to set foot in the Xie residence!"

Xie Bingfeng stopped Lady Xiao, turning to Xie Jinglan. "What does this have to do with Tao-er? Xie Jinglan, explain yourself plainly!"

Xie Jinglan sneered and drawled, "It's Dage who adores Lady Liu. His love for her extends to her belongings. He carries that handkerchief around with him all day, so it reeks of his own powder. Can't you smell it, Father?"

Xie Bingfeng quickly picked up the handkerchief, sniffing it carefully. The fragrance was indeed familiar. He knew he recognized the scent, but he'd assumed it was Lady Liu's fragrance, so he hadn't thought much of it.

Lady Xiao forced a smile. "Fine. I'll have Tao-er fetched right away. Matron Liu, hurry up."

"Wait—don't move," said Xie Bingfeng, then called to his own servant, "Laiwang, go and invite the eldest young master to join us."

Xie Jingtao swaggered in shortly thereafter, sat down on the side, picked his teeth, and looked at Xie Jinglan and Xiahou Lian with glee.

“Mother, I was just studying,” he said smugly. “Why did you call me here? And San-di, why are you covered in tea? You’re a sorry sight… It certainly makes my heart ache.”

But the truth became clear the moment he arrived. Even from five steps away, his powder’s overwhelming odor was strong enough to kill a mosquito.

Ugly people tended to be the most ostentatious. Xie Jingtao, self-conscious about his appearance, tried to compensate in other ways. The sight of him made Xie Bingfeng’s stomach churn. He wanted to throw a teacup at him as well, and since he’d already tossed his at Xie Jinglan, he grabbed Lady Xiao’s instead and hurled it at Xie Jingtao.

Xie Jingtao was so frightened, he fell to his knees beside Xie Jinglan, shuddering. “Father, please calm down,” he stammered. “I know I’ve done wrong.”

“And *what* exactly have you done wrong?!”

“I…I…” Xie Jingtao instinctively glanced at Lady Xiao, who shot him a fierce glare back. “I don’t know...”

“Then what are you admitting to?!” Even Xie Bingfeng’s beard trembled with his rage. He grabbed a feather duster and struck Xie Jingtao.

Xie Jingtao rose and ran around the room, screeching, “Father! Stop hitting me! The servants are watching!”

“Oh, so you’re still capable of shame?! I’ll beat you to death, you disobedient son!”

“Mother! Save me!”

Xie Bingfeng was ultimately an old man, and after chasing Xie Jingtao around for a while, he was too exhausted to keep running and had to lean on the table, gasping for breath. Xie Jingtao shrank behind Xiahou Lian, who subtly moved closer to Xie Jinglan, exposing the cowardly turtle behind him.

Xie Bingfeng pointed at the handkerchief. “You ungrateful son! Is this handkerchief yours?!”

“If I say it isn’t, you won’t believe me.”

“You…you…! Out of my sight! Go kneel in the ancestral hall!”

“Fine, I’ll go right away. Please don’t be angry.” Standing, Xie Jingtao ordered his servant, “Hey, you! Hurry up and fetch my cot, some snacks, eroti—uh, books, and so on. Bring them to the ancestral hall.”

“Brat!” Xie Bingfeng flew into a thunderous rage but still couldn’t catch his breath and coughed violently.

Xie Jinglan, who had been silent all this time, suddenly spoke up. “There’s another culprit. Another culprit who should be punished. They’re in the ancestral hall.”

“Who?! My second son? He’s as diligent as you! How could he be up to such mischief?! Xie Jingtao, you must’ve led Tan-er astray, you brat!”

Xie Jingtao rolled his eyes. “Why blame me? That kid is Mother’s spy. I’d never take him with me.”

Xie Jinglan raised his face and gave Xie Bingfeng a mocking smile. “It’s quite a coincidence. These past few days, I’ve been studying in Xiuwen Hall, and I accidentally discovered the five volumes of portraits of Wanxiang Tower women that you hid in the library. Truly...” Xie Jinglan’s lips twitched, and he smiled somewhat ferociously. “A feast for the eyes.”

It took the stunned Xie Bingfeng a long time to squeeze out a reply. “Shut...shut up!”

“Who was the woman you mentioned earlier? Lady Liu?” Xie Jinglan continued. “I don’t recall seeing her portrait in any of your volumes. Oh, wait. Now I remember—a page was missing, as if someone had torn it out. Could that have been you, Father? I gather you’re a romantic, to carry Lady Liu’s portrait with you.”

“Shut...shut up!” Xie Bingfeng saw red. With a loud smack, he slapped Xie Jinglan across the face, leaving five scarlet marks on his son’s pale cheek. For a moment, everyone fell silent.

In truth, the portrait volumes in the library hadn’t necessarily belonged to Xie Bingfeng. However, his overreaction encapsulated the old saying “The guilty party protests most.” Everyone understood that.

Lady Xiao pointed at Xie Bingfeng, her face ugly. “You…you never change! I never dreamed that, despite spending all those years away from

home, you'd still manage to become the guest of such a despicable place! Or have you been in cahoots with that wench for even longer?"

"This is a misunderstanding," Xie Bingfeng said, sweating profusely. "This is simply a misunderstanding, Lady. Those books belong to an old friend of mine. He's stored them here for now, that's all."

"The volumes are on the third shelf of the first section and have been disguised to look like the *Rites of Zhou*," Xie Jinglan added expressionlessly. "If you don't believe me, Lady, you can go see for yourself. The title page still bears Father's seal."

Lady Xiao paled. She glared at Xie Bingfeng fiercely, then turned and headed for the library.

Xie Jingtao tugged at Xiahou Lian's sleeve and whispered, "Has your young master lost his mind, daring even to bring up something like this? He really has a death wish."

"You're the one who's lost your mind," Xiahou Lian muttered.

"I will go to the ancestral hall to proceed with my punishment. I hope you will take care of your health, Father," Xie Jinglan said. He bowed to the ground once, then left with Xiahou Lian.

Xie Jingtao was stunned for a moment, but then lifted his robes and followed. Only Xie Bingfeng remained standing stiffly in place. Seeing everyone's bowed heads, he remembered that his shameful secret was now exposed. His face burned with embarrassment, and he could only cover that shame with anger, shouting, "All of you, get out!"

The Xie family's ancestral hall was very old, its walls mottled gold and green. The smell of decay struck a person the moment they stepped inside, though whether it came from the wood or the presence of spirits was impossible to say. Only a few candles were lit, and they cast a feeble glow onto the small area in front of the altar.

Clutching what appeared to be a memorial, Xie Jingtao found a spot to sit. He glanced at Xie Jinglan with an odd mix of resentment and admiration. The expression twisted and crumpled his face, giving him an unsightly resemblance to a meat bun.

Xie Jinglan found a spot as far away from him as possible, lifted his robes, and knelt. Seeing his actions, Xiahou Lian naturally couldn't keep sitting; he knelt beside the other boy.

Xie Jingtao opened the memorial and began mumbling to himself. Xiahou Lian was too far away to hear clearly, only catching phrases: "… colluding with rebel forces, plotting rebellion... That is the second crime..."

After a while, Xie Jingtao found himself unable to memorize any more. He turned to look at Xie Jinglan. "Hey, Xie Jinglan—you're really something."

Xie Jinglan remained expressionless, showing no intention of responding.

"I actually already knew about Father's affair. I caught him red-handed several times. If I hadn't ducked away quickly, he'd have discovered me. Say, how come you exposed Father's dirty secrets? If you hadn't, everything would've been fine." Xie Jingtao clicked his tongue. "Then again, I used to think that you were a bit of a sissy. The kind of person who just makes you want to punch them. I never expected you to have such guts."

Xie Jinglan continued to ignore him, but Xie Jingtao didn't mind. He continued, "How about this? From now on, you can hang out with me. Next time I go to Wanxiang Tower, I'll bring you with me. Heh… Maybe I'll even let you try out its intoxicating pleasures. Ah—but you're still a bit young for that. I wonder if you'd even appreciate them..."

Seeing Xie Jingtao get more and more carried away, Xiahou Lian interrupted quickly. "Enough already. My young master isn't like you. Memorize that memorial and stop your nonsense."

Xie Jingtao snorted. "Ingrate." He glanced down at the memorial in his hand, then back at them, puzzled. "Aren't *you* going to memorize it? Father's going to check it the day after tomorrow."

"What is it? We don't have one," Xiahou Lian said.

"It's the document impeaching Wei De. Father has nothing better to do, so he wants everyone in the residence to commit it to memory. Those of us who can read should memorize it ourselves, and those who can't read should learn it from the steward."

Xiahou Lian fell silent. The “everyone” Xie Jingtao mentioned probably didn’t include Qiuwu Courtyard.

Xie Jinglan was extraordinarily talented, and Xiahou Lian didn’t understand why Xie Bingfeng refused to acknowledge that and insisted on sidelining him.

The moon glided westward, hanging high above the willow branches. The candle near Xie Jingtao had gone out at some point, and the sound of his snoring came from the darkness. The night was quiet but for the occasional chirping of insects hidden in the grass. Outside, the wind picked up, causing the door to tremble in its frame. Clumps of dust dropped from the doorjamb like snow that’d never melted.

Xiahou Lian was dozing when the door quietly opened. Someone outside hissed. Xiahou Lian turned his head to see Lianxiang and Aunt Lan peeking in, making faces and gesturing to him.

Xiahou Lian nudged Xie Jinglan, and together, they crept carefully around Xie Jingtao and crouched by the door.

Aunt Lan handed Xiahou Lian a blanket, her face full of concern. “It’s cold at night, and I don’t want you two to freeze. This blanket will have to do for now. If it’s still too cold, huddle together to keep warm.”

Sharp-eyed Lianxiang noticed the red marks on Xie Jinglan’s face, and she didn’t have to guess what had happened. Her eyes immediately filled with tears.

Xiahou Lian draped the blanket over Xie Jinglan’s back. “Auntie, you’re the best.”

“We should go now,” Aunt Lan said. “If Matron Liu found out we’d visited, who knows what trouble she’d stir up.”

“Wait!” Xie Jinglan grabbed Aunt Lan’s sleeve. “Auntie, do you know why Father hates me and my mother so much?”

Aunt Lan was visibly startled. Her eyes darted nervously. “I...” She seemed reluctant to talk about it, hesitating for a long time without giving a clear answer.

“Auntie, I want the truth.”

“Just tell him, Auntie,” Lianxiang urged.

Aunt Lan sighed, glanced at Xie Jinglan, and slowly began, “Your mother was originally a maid who handled the writing tools and ink, as you know. One day, the lord got drunk and...took your mother. That kind of thing does happen in every household, but your mother was stubborn and refused to accept it. She snuck out of the residence and reported it to the authorities.”

“And then?” Xie Jinglan asked.

“The official at that time happened to be stubborn and inflexible. However much the lord pleaded, he wouldn’t budge. He convicted the lord of raping a servant and demoted him three ranks. From then on, the lord hated your mother. Even when she was pregnant with you, he ignored you both.” Aunt Lan wiped tears from her eyes. “Men are so heartless. But it was hard on your mother—and on you.”

“If she reported it to the authorities, she must have been prepared to leave Xie Bingfeng’s household. Why did she return as a concubine?” Xiahou Lian asked.

Aunt Lan shook her head. “Initially, your mother didn’t know that she was pregnant with you, Shaoye. By the time she realized, it was too late to do anything about it. Tell me, how could a woman incapable of carrying heavy loads or doing hard labor raise a child by herself? Shaoye couldn’t grow up without a father. She originally refused to return to the residence, but I begged her with all my might, and she finally agreed to come back.”

Xiahou Lian opened his mouth, wanting to say something. Seeing Aunt Lan’s tears, however, he couldn’t bring himself to speak.

“The lord was too cruel,” Aunt Lan said. “Your mother lived in cold isolation in the courtyard, with no one to care for or love her. After just a few years, she passed away.”

“I understand.” Xie Jinglan nodded. “You should go back now.”

“You must take care of yourself, Shaoye.” Then she glared at Xiahou Lian. “And you take good care of him. It’s all your fault what happened this time.”

“I know,” Xiahou Lian muttered.

Closing the door tightly, Xie Jinglan sat on the ground and clasped his knees against his chest. He stared into the darkness, lost in thought. He'd been unusually silent tonight, saying barely a word. At some point, the last candle went out, drowning the room in pitch black. The combination of heavy, oppressive darkness and indescribable sadness weighed on his shoulders, making it hard to lift his head.

Perhaps his mother wouldn't have died of despair if Aunt Lan hadn't persuaded her to return.

Perhaps he would've grown up like Xiahou Lian, a little ruffian of the streets. He'd have spent his days causing trouble with his playmates, and when she had time to spare, his mother would've chased him down the street, waving a bamboo switch. His playmates would've shouted, "Run, Xie Jinglan! Faster! Your mother's catching up!"

His eyes stung, and a small tear trembled on his curled lashes before dripping onto his collar. Fortunately, the room was too dark for Xiahou Lian to see.

Xiahou Lian's voice suddenly broke the silence. "Shaoye."

Quickly, Xie Jinglan buried his face in his knees, afraid that Xiahou Lian would see the tearstains on his face.

"I actually lied to you before," Xiahou Lian said softly.

"What'd you lie about?" Xie Jinglan tried to keep his voice steady but couldn't suppress its nasal, weepy tone. Since Xie Jinglan's face was pressed to his knees, though, Xiahou Lian didn't notice anything wrong.

"I know who my father is."

"Is he a scholar? Did he become an official?"

"It doesn't matter. You wouldn't know him anyway." Xiahou Lian fidgeted. "My mother won't let me acknowledge him."

Xie Jinglan raised his head, puzzled. "How come?"

"She says I'm an indomitable man, and that I should never look to someone else to be my father. Instead, I should make everyone call *me* Father—preferably while kneeling to me."

Xie Jinglan was quiet.

“Shaoye, you’re more capable than I am. Not only will you make them kneel and call *you* Father, you’ll make them do so crying. No one should abuse the young and the poor. What happened today—and what happened to your mother—we’ll eventually settle those scores.”

Xiahou Lian spoke with certainty. Even though they were both still just kids with no real experience, he spoke as if their success was assured. Xie Jinglan peered at him through the pitch-black darkness, as if he saw light in his eyes like stars shining in the night.

Xiahou Lian’s eyes were beautiful. He’d once said that he had his mother’s eyes. Xie Jinglan thought of the demonic woman Dai Shengyan had described, capable of cutting through anything with a single slash.

For no particular reason, he believed what Xiahou Lian said. He didn’t know whether that was because he believed in himself or in Xiahou Lian.

Chapter 15:
The Setting Sun

DAI SHENGYAN HADN'T ABANDONED his youngest disciple. As soon as he received the servant's message, he left the old friend he was visiting and rushed back, so anxious that he plucked several strands from his beard along the way.

"This child…" Dai Shengyan said to himself. Gazing at Xie Jinglan's stubborn expression, he told the boy, "I thought you were a sensible prodigy who'd know better than to clash head-on with his father. Then again, you're only twelve. It's hard to escape the impulsiveness of youth."

"There are things that can't be tolerated," Xie Jinglan replied indifferently.

Dai Shengyan heaved a long sigh, pondered for a moment, and then said, "Jinglan, would you be willing to leave your home to follow an old man like me? To live a life of wandering and hardship, with no fixed home?"

Xie Jinglan raised his head suddenly, looking at the old man in disbelief. He'd long known that Dai Shengyan was a restless man, who always tired of staying in one place, and was unwilling to settle in Jinling even in his twilight years. He'd thought that Dai Shengyan, appreciating Xie Jinglan's talent, was merely willing to guide the boy while staying in Jinling, giving Xie Jinglan the prestigious title of "Dai Shengyan's final disciple" to make his life a bit easier. He had never expected that Dai Shengyan might actually be willing to take him along.

"If you won't abandon me, Xiansheng, this disciple is willing to serve as your loyal companion, like Zilu and Yan Hui served Confucius!"

"Ha ha ha! Well, this old man has neither money nor power. So as long as you don't mind hardship, that's enough."

"To live like a carefree cloud or a wild crane hidden in the mountains —how could any mundane comforts compare to that?"

Dai Shengyan's beard twitched almost imperceptibly. "That's a shame, a shame. Though I've abandoned the secular world, I'm still known to it. You can't exactly call this seclusion—it's more aimless wandering while I neglect my duties." He lifted his eyes and glanced at the well-behaved young disciple sitting beside him. Clearing his throat, he added, "Today, I won't be teaching you the classics, Jinglan. Instead, let's discuss the Dao."

Xie Jinglan straightened up. "Please speak."

"Tell me, what do the words of the sages comprise?"

That question stumped Xie Jinglan. The answer was so vast. How many characters total did the words of the sages, the Four Books and Five Classics, contain? Was he supposed to recite them all?

He thought for a while, then tentatively said, "Ethics and moral principles?"

"Oh? Then why don't the 'words of the sages' include the crude precepts of villagers? 'When hungry, one must eat; when cold, one must don clothing.' Aren't those also ethics and moral principles?"

"Those principles are common sense," Xie Jinglan replied. "The sages speak of what others cannot."

"Anyone can spout grand principles. In truth, there is no such thing as the 'words of sages,'" Dai Shengyan said gently. "However, Jinglan, a sage can do what others cannot, endure what others cannot, and tolerate what others cannot."

He spoke with profound gravity, his drooping eyes fixed on his introspective youngest disciple. Xie Jinglan lowered his gaze, staring at the intricate patterns carved along the edge of the table.

"I'm taking you away for two reasons," Dai Shengyan continued. "First, so that you can broaden your horizons and focus on your studies. Second, so that when you look back on these events, you'll realize there's nothing you can't let go of. By the time you reach my age, you won't have the strength to hold on to anything, even if you want to. The sky is vast, and the clouds roam wide—why confine yourself to a tiny courtyard?"

But Xie Jinglan wasn't yet Dai Shengyan's age. At twelve years old, he was at the height of his youthful vigor. Though more composed than most children his age, he couldn't escape the impulses of his heart. He'd painstakingly crafted a refined facade of gentleness, kindness, respect, frugality, and humility. However, the accumulated resentments he couldn't voice nor show on his face were all stored in his heart, waiting for the day they would coalesce into a powerful demon.

Enduring fits of rage could make one a hero, but what if Xie Jinglan was willing to become a petty, narrow-minded scoundrel?

"You have treated me well, Xiansheng, so I do not wish to deceive you," Xie Jinglan said, lowering his eyes. "I am narrow-minded, and I hold grudges. If you dislike those traits, it's best that you leave me behind."

Dai Shengyan shook his head helplessly. "You're such a difficult child. If you're being truthful, then this old man really must bring you with him. If I don't keep you in check, the name 'Xie Jinglan' might one day be written in the *Book of Treacherous Officials*."

"Xiansheng worries too much. I would never do anything to harm the country or its people," Xie Jinglan said with a faint smile, bowing slightly. "However, since you are willing to take me in, I'll have to saddle you with looking after me."

Xie Jinglan brought news of Dai Shengyan's decision back to Qiuwu Courtyard, and everyone was overjoyed. Xiahou Lian crossed his arms and leaned against the door, eyes glimmering, a faint smile on his face. When Xie Jinglan saw him, the joy in his heart faded at once. He suddenly remembered that the other boy couldn't follow him; Xiahou Lian had to stay in Jinling and await his mother.

In other words, the day Xie Jinglan and Dai Shengyan set off would be the day he and Xiahou Lian parted.

"Shaoye, you must study hard," Xiahou Lian said with a laugh. "When you're a high-ranking official someday, don't forget about me. This humble servant will be counting on you then!"

Xie Jinglan responded with a low grunt, then asked, "After you return to the mountain, will you ever have a chance to come back down?"

Xiahou Lian scratched his head. “If I follow in my mother’s footsteps, then I’ll definitely have to come down.”

“You mean, if you don’t take up her profession, you won’t be able to come back?”

Xiahou Lian fell silent for a moment. “That’s right. I’d be a farmer and spend the rest of my life on the mountain, planting rice and flowers.”

To protect the temple, Qiye Garden forbade anyone who wasn’t an assassin from visiting or leaving the mountain. Those who accidentally wandered onto the mountain never returned alive. Outsiders thought that was because the mountain was so vast; they assumed people got lost or were eaten by wild beasts. No one knew that the most ferocious beasts on the mountain were the Garden’s assassins. Similarly, those from the mountain temple couldn’t leave unless they became assassins. The assassins’ descendants became either new assassins or prisoners of the mountain forests.

Xiahou Lian would soon make his choice. He’d always been determined to become an assassin, for freedom’s sake. But now, he’d abruptly realized that killing wasn’t as easy as he’d imagined. He remembered the steward’s corpse slowly cooling on the floor, and recalled his own terror as the claw sank into his shoulder in the great locust tree, as if the King of Hell himself had seized him by the throat. Assassins walked hand in hand with death, and he wasn’t yet strong enough to face that without fear.

“Where is the mountain? Wait for me there. I’ll come save you,” Xie Jinglan said.

Xiahou Lian shook his head with a bitter smile. “I can’t tell you.”

“Fine,” Xie Jinglan said. “I’ll find out for myself.”

“I’ll probably take up my mother’s mantle,” Xiahou Lian said, blinking at Xie Jinglan. “But if you really are capable of challenging us by then, I’ll follow you, and I hope that the future Lord Xie Jinglan will then give me a job. I can’t really write essays, but my martial arts skills pass muster. I can be your gatekeeper and guard your home for you.”

“Deal. I’ll pay you two taels of silver a month and cover your room and board—but I won’t provide a wife.”

“Ha ha ha! That’s very generous of you.”

They looked at one another and laughed, their eyes filled with sparkling starlight.

Lanterns had been hung outside, and Xie Jinglan and Xiahou Lian left the study. Xiahou Lian headed for the kitchen to fetch food, while Xie Jinglan lifted the curtain to the main room and entered. Aunt Lan had already set the table, and she beckoned Xie Jinglan to sit.

Xie Jinglan looked around and noticed that all the servants were present but for one. He asked, “Where’s Lianxiang?”

“I don’t know,” Aunt Lan said. “She’s been missing since this afternoon. She probably went to play with maids from another courtyard. I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

Xie Jinglan nodded, shrugging it off.

Meanwhile, Xiahou Lian squatted on a walkway, quickly finishing his meal. After returning his bowl and chopsticks to the kitchen, he lifted the curtain and bumped into Lianxiang.

“Are you blind, Xiahou Lian?!” Lianxiang said angrily, rubbing her head.

“Is your head made of iron? That hurt!” Xiahou Lian pouted, then noticed the pouch she held. “Hey—isn’t that the pouch I keep my itching flowers in? How come you have it? You stole my stuff!”

“Ugh! Who’d steal something of *yours*? I don’t want your stupid pouch!” Lianxiang rolled her eyes and lobbed the pouch at Xiahou Lian.

Xiahou Lian was baffled. Opening the pouch, he saw that the itching flowers were gone.

He picked itching flowers at the manor. They were beautiful, with pink petals tipped with purple. However, they couldn’t be handled carelessly—the slightest contact with them caused red rashes and intense itches.

Xiahou Lian had a habit of collecting strange things, and the itching flowers were prized possessions of his. Lianxiang must’ve taken them to play a prank on someone. Xiahou Lian decided to check his bedding

thoroughly. The two of them had always been at odds; the little minx was trying to mess with him.

Dai Shengyan went to Xie Bingfeng to discuss Xie Jinglan's departure. As expected, Xie Bingfeng was more than happy for Xie Jinglan to leave, preferably never to return. They settled the matter amicably, and Dai Shengyan told Xie Jinglan that, once the weather warmed up, they would depart for their next destination—most likely Shuobei.

Outside attending morning lectures, Xie Jinglan spent his days in the library. As always, Xiahou Lian joined him once he'd finished the laundry, bringing him tea and water. After the recent trouble, and with Xie Jinglan preparing to leave, Xiahou Lian no longer wandered around aimlessly. Instead, he obediently followed Xie Jinglan and was never far from his side.

One day, while Xiahou Lian was idly picking flowers in the garden, Aunt Lan stumbled into the library. "Something awful has happened!" she shouted. "Something awful!"

"What's wrong?" Xiahou Lian asked, supporting Aunt Lan. Xie Jinglan came over to join them.

"Lianxiang…Lianxiang..."

"What happened to Lianxiang?" Xie Jinglan prompted.

"Lianxiang… The mistress said Lianxiang tried to poison her and ordered that she be…beaten to death. Please hurry to the main courtyard, Shaoye. They've already dragged Lianxiang there!"

Xiahou Lian and Xie Jinglan exchanged glances and immediately raced toward the main courtyard, hoping those already there were taking their time.

The path suddenly seemed endless. The enormous Xie residence's sprawling walkways twisted and turned as if conspiring to delay their arrival at the courtyard. Artificial mountains and rocks loomed before them and blocked their way, and the once-elegant garden scenery now appeared sinister.

The setting sun hung red in the sky, the horizon ablaze. Every now and then, birds darted toward the clouds as if diving into an endless sea of flame.

Panting heavily, they reached the main courtyard's entrance. Two servants were carrying out a body draped in cloth.

As the servants turned, a hand slipped from under the sheet. It was well maintained, pale and slender, with fingers like peeled scallions and not a hangnail in sight. Xiahou Lian broke down at the sight of that hand; tears streamed down his face as he rushed forward to grab it.

Lianxiang had always prided herself on her hands. She never did laundry or washed dishes, sticking to needlework. She said her hands were meant to weave knots and embroider patterns for Xie Jinglan and must not be ruined. Each morning, she rubbed her hands with scented cream, and she trimmed her nails every few days. Now wooden splinters were embedded between the fingers of those cherished hands, which had clutched the wooden bench while Lianxiang was beaten.

Xiahou Lian remembered her spoiled, willful nature, but also the time she'd secretly brought him steamed buns and water in the woodshed. Her lively smile was still vivid in his mind, but now she was cold and lifeless.

Several servants rushed forward and grabbed Xiahou Lian, pinning him to the ground. He struggled fiercely, watching helplessly as they carried Lianxiang away.

Lady Xiao stood on the steps, wearing a translucent gauze veil. She looked indifferently at Xie Jinglan and Xiahou Lian. Through her veil, they spotted small red spots on her face.

"This maid tried to poison me. I had Steward Liu administer her punishment. What do you have to say about it, Xie Jinglan?" Lady Xiao's voice carried across the courtyard.

Steward Liu? How could that be? Didn't Qiu-dage kill him long ago? Confused, Xiahou Lian turned his head and saw the man, who should've been long dead. He stood in the courtyard, wearing a familiar smile—the smile of Qiu Ye.

A chill ran through Xiahou Lian's chest, his back prickling with goosebumps. Wherever Qiye Garden assassins went, blood flowed like a river. He remembered the deal Qiu Ye had struck with the Eastern Depot agents. If Qiu Ye had disguised himself as Steward Liu, was he here to kill Xie Bingfeng?

Xie Jinglan pushed the servants aside and helped Xiahou Lian stand up. “I wouldn’t dare to say anything. I merely came to bid farewell to my former servant. Please, Lady, won’t you grant me that one small courtesy?”

“You might’ve orchestrated this attempted poisoning yourself!”

“Oh, so what if I did? Would you have me killed as well, Lady?” Xie Jinglan asked coldly.

“You—”

Xie Jinglan turned to Xiahou Lian. “Go back and stay with Auntie. I’ll see Lianxiang off.”

Both boys’ eyes were full of deep sorrow.

Xiahou Lian grabbed Xie Jinglan’s wrist. “Shaoye.”

Xie Jinglan shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said softly.

Xiahou Lian nodded, then glanced at Qiu Ye. Qiu Ye bowed to Lady Xiao from a distance, then began following Xiahou Lian out from afar.

When Xiahou Lian reached the garden, Qiu Ye caught up with him.

“Qiu-dage, how come you’re disguised as—”

Qiu Ye pressed a finger to Xiahou Lian’s lips. “Shh. Don’t ask questions.”

Xiahou Lian turned to leave, but Qiu Ye grabbed him. “The girl is still alive.”

Xiahou Lian froze. “What did you say?”

Qiu Ye blinked. “I know she’s your playmate. I left a little life in her, though I can’t say whether her legs will fully recover.”

Gratitude overwhelmed Xiahou Lian. “Qiu-dage, thank you!”

Qiu Ye patted his head. “Do you still want to be an assassin, Xiao-Lian?”

“I...”

“You know, there’s nothing wrong with the mountain. It’s only a bit small. And the world itself is just a giant prison.”

“Qiu-dage, how come none of you want me to be an assassin? Uncle Duan once said something like that, and you’re the same way. Am I really not suited to it?”

“Whether you’re suited to it is something only you can determine. How would I know?” Smiling, Qiu Ye pushed Xiahou Lian. “All right. Go pack your things. Your uncle’s here to take you home.”

Xiahou Lian was stunned. “What? So soon?!”

Chapter 16:
The Storm Approaches

TO OBTAIN A MOMENT OF JOY, one needed to endure ten times as much suffering. And if one had experienced joy already, suffering was then levied tenfold.

Xie Jinglan had long understood that principle, but he'd never expected the heavens to be so harsh.

Standing at the courtyard entrance, he watched Xiahou Lian carry a bundle on his back, a burly man beside him. That man was tall, with a broad face and dark skin. Despite the cold weather, he'd rolled his sleeves up to reveal two muscular arms. He seemed awkward, unsure of where to place his hands; even Xiahou Lian looked more dignified. The man glanced around; seeing Xie Jinglan, he turned to Aunt Lan and asked, "Who's this?"

Aunt Lan, who had been quietly weeping, quickly wiped her tears and bowed. "Shaoye. Xiahou Lian's father has come to take him home."

The man laughed heartily. "So this is your shaoye."

He pulled from his pocket a packet of pine-nut candies wrapped in oil paper and offered it to Xie Jinglan. "I am Xiahou Lian's father. I apologize for any trouble he might've caused during his stay. I had no choice but to sell him to the manor—our family's harvest failed, and my wife had just given birth to a child. Fortunately, things are better now, so I rushed here to reclaim him. He's a lucky boy. I hear that an official has already repaid you for him, so I'll be taking him away now. Is there anything else the shaoye needs?"

Xiahou Lian and his "father" clearly hadn't coordinated their stories; their explanations were completely different. Xiahou Lian looked somewhat chagrined, but Xie Jinglan ignored the man and just asked Xiahou Lian, "Are you leaving?"

"Yes, I'm leaving."

The man tucked the candies away awkwardly, then stood with his arms crossed, waiting for the pair to finish their conversation.

“Did you pack everything?”

“I did.”

“If I write to you, where should I send the letter?”

Xiahou Lian looked at Uncle Duan. *This kid’s a real pain*, thought Uncle Duan, feeling a headache coming on. He forced a smile. “That’ll be a bit tricky. Our little corner of the world is too remote to receive mail.”

Xie Jinglan had already guessed that this man wouldn’t let him stay in touch with Xiahou Lian. Not pressing further, he simply said, “If you want to write to me, send the letter to Lord Su’s residence. He’ll forward it to Xiansheng.”

“All right. Just don’t complain about my terrible penmanship.”

“Well, you should get going. Safe travels.”

Xiahou Lian hesitated for a moment, then said, “About Lianxiang—”

“I saw her mother taking away her body with my own eyes. You don’t need to worry.”

In the end, Xiahou Lian had decided against telling Xie Jinglan that Lianxiang was alive. After all, if he revealed that Lianxiang had survived, it was sure to implicate Qiu Ye. He fell silent for a while, then said, “Shaoye, your father...” His eyes flickered.

At a glance, Xie Jinglan could tell that something was going on. “There’s nothing you need to tell me,” he said. “My father has nothing to do with me anymore.”

“I understand.” Xiahou Lian patted Xie Jinglan’s shoulder. “Then I’ll be on my way.”

“Until we meet again.”

“Until we meet again.”

Aunt Lan stuffed a few steamed buns into Xiahou Lian’s hands, tears streaming down her face. “Take care, Xiao-Lian.”

“You take care too, Auntie. Don’t be too sad, or you’ll make yourself sick.” Xiahou Lian took the buns, grabbed Uncle Duan’s hand, and turned to leave.

Xie Jinglan and Aunt Lan escorted the pair to the side gate, watching as they slowly walked away. One tall and the other short, the two stumbled down the alley, the distant sunset casting a crimson glow. Step by step, Xiahou Lian walked into the distance, lit by the slanting sunlight. That light turned his figure hazy, as if he might vanish into the sunset at any moment.

Suddenly, Xie Jinglan felt an uncontrollable fear. Would he and Xiahou Lian ever see each other again?

“Xiahou Lian!”

Xie Jinglan suddenly chased after him. At the sound of his voice, Xiahou Lian turned around just in time for Xie Jinglan to pull him into a tight embrace.

Xiahou Lian sniffed lightly. Xie Jinglan smelled of soap.

“Don’t forget our talk in the study the other day,” Xie Jinglan murmured into his shoulder.

“I won’t forget. I took it to heart.”

“I’ll find you.”

“Mm-hmm. I know.”

“All right. You can go now.”

“Until we meet again.”

“Until we meet again.”

This time, Xiahou Lian really did leave. Xie Jinglan leaned against the wall and watched. The rough bricks scratched his hand, making it sting. At the entrance of the alley, Xiahou Lian climbed onto an oxcart, then disappeared around the corner.

He didn’t actually leave Jinling, though. Uncle Duan had arranged for him to board at Wanxiang Tower. His uncle went out early each morning and returned late at night; Xiahou Lian rarely saw him. And so Xiahou Lian resumed his carefree lifestyle. Fortunately, he was accustomed to being on his own and had long since learned to amuse himself.

He wasn’t wrong that Qiye Garden’s eyes were on Xie Bingfeng. Assassins had entered Jinling one by one. Wanxiang Tower’s front courtyard was brightly lit, a place of revelry and indulgence—a paradise on earth. The back courtyard was where the assassins went to douse their blades with strong liquor, their expressionless white porcelain masks luminous under the orange candlelight. Six of the Garden’s Eight Legions had arrived. The remaining two were absent—one was recuperating on the mountain after losing an arm during his last assassination, and the other was Xiahou Lian’s mother. She was still in the Western Regions, and there hadn’t been any news on her progress.

Xiahou Lian felt a twinge of unease. The assassins of Qiye Garden usually worked independently, lone wolves on a snowy plain. But now, at least twenty assassins had gathered in the back courtyard, and the Garden had no more than thirty assassins total. Still, Xiahou Lian didn’t dare ask too many questions. These assassins were desperadoes, more bloodthirsty than a wolf pack. They wouldn’t respect him just because he was the Garuda’s son. They only respected those who wielded sharper blades than they did.

Who could they be targeting? Each assassin would have to end at least one life, so they were planning to kill no less than twenty people in Jinling. That would be an unprecedented mission for the Garden.

Why had Uncle Duan removed Xiahou Lian from the Xie residence before his mother returned? Just because they were planning to assassinate Xie Bingfeng?

Xiahou Lian couldn't figure it out, so he spent his days running wild around Wanxiang Tower. After just a few days' stay, he'd familiarized himself with its layout. He climbed the pillars to the rafters, then swung from those beams to the third floor to sneak into Lady Liu's room. There, he snatched a pair of gold-and-jade earrings from her dressing table.

Uncle Duan knew that Xiahou Lian couldn't hold on to money, so he'd been particularly stingy lately. The sums of money he gave the boy were leaner than a toothpick—not even enough to buy snacks.

Footsteps sounded outside the door. Xiahou Lian stuffed the earrings into his pocket and stepped onto the windowsill, then clung to the wall outside, the Qinhuai River's quiet waters flowing below.

Lady Liu entered her room and sat at the dressing table, looking at the man reflected in the mirror. "What brings you here today? I thought you'd forgotten all about me."

"I've been busy impeaching that vile eunuch Wei—busy enough to make my head spin. Now that I finally have some free time, I've come to see you." Xie Bingfeng leaned closer to Lady Liu, inhaling a deep breath of her perfume. "So fragrant, my dear. What kind of powder are you using? It smells wonderful."

"Powder? This is my natural scent." Lady Liu snorted. "You've already been demoted to Jinling, yet you're still trying to impeach someone? Do you want to be banished to some godforsaken place? I don't have time to entertain you."

"Don't worry. This time, the six ministries, three judicial offices, and twenty-four agencies have jointly submitted a memorial. We're sure to bring that eunuch down. The day he falls, I'll return to the capital," Xie Bingfeng laughed, his face full of pride.

“The six ministries and three judicial offices? Those are all in the capital. What does a minor Jinling official like you have to do with it? You’re just meddling,” Lady Liu said dismissively.

“What do you know? My name is on the joint memorial, so when the time comes, I’ll get a share of the credit. Besides, I’ve already announced that every member of the Xie household has memorized the memorial. Even if I die, all 108 members of the Xie family will carry on my cause and appeal directly to the emperor. People everywhere will praise my righteous deed! My official rank may be lower than before, but my reputation will be far greater. What does it matter if I’m just a minor official in Jinling?”

Lady Liu snorted. “Fame chaser.”

“You’re so shortsighted, woman. This immortal deed will make history for thousands of years. When historians write about it, they’ll surely praise me. You really—” Xie Bingfeng was so angry that he was now panting, but when he caught sight of Lady Liu sitting gracefully—face delicate as fine porcelain, eyelashes like crescent moons—he couldn’t resist leaning in closer. “Forget it, forget it. There’s no point arguing with you. When I’m directed to return to the capital, I’ll purchase you and take you with me. Then you’ll see the benefits yourself.”

Lady Liu laughed. “Fine, I’ll wait. You’d better keep your word.”

“Of course,” Xie Bingfeng said, kissing Lady Liu. “I should go now. That old hag back home keeps a close eye on me lately. I’ll come see you again later.”

“Go on, go on. Be careful not to get burned.” Lady Liu waved her fan, shooing him away.

When the man was finally gone, Lady Liu raised a handkerchief to wipe her face, muttering angrily, “You old fool. You don’t even know your life is in danger. You made your entire household memorize the impeachment memorial? That means Wei De is going to exterminate your whole family. Yet you’re still crowing to yourself, dreaming about making your mark on history. How ridiculous!”

A chill ran through Xiahou Lian’s body as he clung to the window. Once Lady Liu left, he cautiously climbed back into the room.

The word “exterminate” weighed heavily on his chest. He was so overcome with anxiety that he forgot how he even got downstairs.

When would this massacre happen? And when was Xie Jinglan leaving the Xie residence? Would he escape? Xiahou Lian was frantic yet had no plan.

How was he supposed to save Xie Jinglan and Aunt Lan all by himself? What about Guixiang, the girl from the study who always called him “Lian-gege”? How could he save everyone?

A plan, a plan, he kept telling himself. *Think of a plan!*

“Xiao-Lian!” Uncle Duan smacked the back of the boy’s head. “What are you wandering around for? Hurry back to your room and get some rest. The front courtyard is a mess. Get moving.”

Xiahou Lian looked up, and Uncle Duan’s dark face came into view. “Uncle, haven’t you always told me not to become an assassin?”

“Huh? Have you come around?” Uncle Duan ruffled Xiahou Lian’s hair. “There’s nothing wrong with raising chickens and ducks on our mountain. It’s big enough for you to run wild for a lifetime.”

I’m already tired of that, Xiahou Lian thought with disdain. “Take me with you on this mission,” he said to Uncle Duan. “Let me see for myself what a real battle is like, and then I’ll make my decision.”

“No.” Uncle Duan refused without hesitation.

“Why not?”

“What do you mean, ‘why not’?! With those skinny arms and legs of yours, even if I gave you a blade, you couldn’t kill a pig, let alone a person. You’re better off trimming flowers or chopping wood. And what if something happened to you? How could I explain that to your mother?”

“I won’t kill anyone, I’ll just watch from the side,” Xiahou Lian said. “If you don’t let me experience a real battle for myself, how can I make the right choice? You’re planning to wipe out the Xie family, right? I’ll just keep to one side and observe.”

Uncle Duan slapped a hand over Xiahou Lian’s mouth, shuddering, then dragged him to a corner. “Where did you hear that, you little rascal?”

“Don’t worry about where I heard it. I know.”

Uncle Duan knew Xiahou Lian was as quick as a monkey. One of the assassins might have let something slip while Xiahou Lian was eavesdropping. After a moment’s consideration, he said, “I suppose that wouldn’t be entirely impossible.”

Xiahou Lian’s eyes lit up. “Uncle, take me with you!” he insisted.

Uncle Duan sighed helplessly. “Fine. Listen carefully. Wear your clothes and mask properly. Don’t run around like you usually do while we’re at work. And when you hear the sound of the temple block, follow the rest of us and retreat.”

Xiahou Lian nodded eagerly.

Uncle Duan took a short knife from his waistband and handed it to Xiahou Lian. It was worn, the sharkskin scabbard covered in scratches. The intricate carvings, stained with deep-red blood, exuded a silent ferocity. Xiahou Lian drew the blade and saw his face shining back from its gleaming surface.

“If you have the skill, you can try killing a few people,” Uncle Duan said. “Once you’ve killed someone, you’ll see that being an assassin isn’t as fun as it seems. To become Qiye Garden’s best assassin, you must first forge yourself into a blade. And to forge yourself into a blade, your heart must first turn to steel.”

How could a heart of flesh become steel? Xiahou Lian sheathed the knife and forced a smile. “I understand. Just wait and see!”

Chapter 17:
The Field of Slaughter

THE COURTYARD WAS DARK, and moonlight spilled across the ground.

Under the meager light of a single lamp, Xie Jinglan closed a newly published collection of eight-legged essays and rubbed his weary eyes. “Pour me some tea, Xiahou Lian,” he called.

Only after he spoke did he remember that Xiahou Lian had already gone home. The sound of rustling wind filled the courtyard, and a little barking echoed in the distance. The scenery was the same, but without Xiahou Lian’s chatter, the entire courtyard felt empty, as if the Xie residence had lost all its vitality.

Xie Bingfeng completely ignored Xie Jinglan now. Lady Xiao’s rash had only just healed; she was still recuperating in her room and thus left him alone. He finally had some peace again. He continued to attend Dai Shengyan’s lectures every day and to spend his nights in the library until late. Aunt Lan was getting old and couldn’t stay up with Xie Jinglan, and he wasn’t used to having anyone else serve him, so he sat alone with a lamp and a book, not even noticing when his tea went cold.

He picked up his brush, intending to practice calligraphy. But as soon as his brush touched the paper, he wrote a single character without thinking: *Lian*. He thought of Xiahou Lian’s terrible handwriting and wondered whether the boy would still practice calligraphy after returning to the mountain.

On the verge of nodding off, Xie Jinglan packed up his writing tools, extinguished the lamp, and walked out. The night was chilly, and the barking grew closer, loud and abrupt. Xie Jinglan was a bit worried that the dogs outside the residence might sneak in, so he held up his lantern, walking carefully along the dark path.

Suddenly, a nearby courtyard erupted into chaos. Xie Jinglan cocked his head to listen to the faint sounds of argument and commotion. Matters

outside Qiuwu Courtyard had never concerned him, however, so he paid no attention to the hubbub and continued walking. Then, out of nowhere, a hand reached from behind him and covered his mouth. The lantern clattered to the ground as someone dragged him into a pitch-black room.

Xie Jinglan struggled with all his might, landing a few punches on the person holding him before they snapped, “Stop hitting me! It’s *me*!”

“Xiahou Lian!” Xie Jinglan stopped in surprise, staring at the shadowy figure in the darkness. “Why are you here?”

Once Xie Jinglan’s eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he saw that Xiahou Lian was wearing a white mask and dressed all in black, his lean muscles evident beneath his tight clothing. Foreboding rose in Xie Jinglan’s heart.

Xiahou Lian frantically began stripping his clothes off. “Undress. Hurry up.”

“What are you doing? What’s going on?” Xie Jinglan stared at Xiahou Lian, shocked. “Explain yourself!”

“There’s no time!” Xiahou Lian saw that Xie Jinglan wasn’t moving. He started tugging the other boy’s clothes, only to be met with fierce resistance. “Qiye Garden is going to slaughter your entire family. If we don’t leave now, it’ll be too late!”

It was as if a clap of thunder had struck Xie Jinglan’s head. He grabbed Xiahou Lian by the collar, asking in disbelief, “What’d you say?!”

As if confirming Xiahou Lian’s words, hurried footsteps sounded outside the door. Xiahou Lian covered Xie Jinglan’s mouth, and the pair crouched by the door, trembling with fear. Outside, a familiar voice was crying and begging for mercy—it sounded like a servant from one of the courtyards. A sharp blade flashed, and a piercing scream rang out. Black blood spattered the paper-covered door, forming a pattern like drooping plum blossoms. Xie Jinglan’s pupils contracted in horror.

The assassin outside didn’t notice the two boys in the room and walked away carrying his saber. Xie Jinglan turned to Xiahou Lian and gripped his shoulders. “Didn’t you say Xie Bingfeng was the target? Why are you wiping out the entire household? Why?!”

“I...” Xiahou Lian’s lips trembled. After a moment, he said, “Your father—”

“Wait! Aunt Lan is still in Qiuwu Courtyard. I have to save her!” Seeming to wake from a dream, Xie Jinglan stumbled to his feet and rushed toward the door, only for Xiahou Lian to grab him around the waist.

“Don’t go! It’s too late! Qiuwu Courtyard is near the side gate—that’s where the assassins entered from! If the library weren’t so far away, I couldn’t have gotten ahead of them in time to come save you!”

The distant wails grew clearer, and shadowy figures dashed past the paper windows. Xie Jinglan pushed Xiahou Lian with all his strength. “No! I have to save her! Xiahou Lian, you bastard, let me go!”

But still Xiahou Lian held him tightly. Xie Jinglan grabbed the other boy’s collar and punched him in the face. Xiahou Lian tumbled backward, a bruise already blooming on his cheek.

Xie Jinglan turned and ran, but Xiahou Lian caught up and pinned him against the wall. “Xie Jinglan! Calm down!” he shouted. “If you go, you’ll just die! Do you hear me?”

“Let me go, Xiahou Lian! Are you just going to abandon Aunt Lan?”

Xiahou Lian looked at him with red eyes. “Do you think I *want* Aunt Lan to die? I can only save you, though! Just you!” His hands dug into Xie Jinglan’s shoulders. “Know how many assassins are here today? Twenty! They blocked the front and back gates. There’s no escape. Qiuwu Courtyard is next to the back gate, so Aunt Lan is already dead!”

Xie Jinglan’s mind went blank. Everything felt like a dream. Shortly before, he’d finished reading by candlelight and had been about to go to bed, lantern in hand. Why had Xiahou Lian suddenly appeared? Why had the assassins suddenly appeared?

Was this a dream? Xie Jinglan looked up in a daze and reached for the window, as if hoping this was just a nightmare.

Xiahou Lian grabbed his hand, took a deep breath, and spoke in a low voice. “Shaoye, listen to me. Put on my clothes and mask, leave through the side gate, and don’t look back. Don’t be afraid. If anyone asks you anything, don’t answer—just keep walking. Understand?”

Xiahou Lian's palm was scorching hot; it was like holding a fireball. Xie Jinglan could feel him trembling, and he looked up to see Xiahou Lian drenched with sweat, eyelashes wet with what might've been sweat or tears. Again, Xiahou Lian asked, "Understand?"

Xie Jinglan shook his head vigorously. "I need to find Xiansheng. I need to go to the military chief's office and tell them to send troops!"

"It's useless!" Xiahou Lian responded. "If you go to Dai-xiansheng, you'll only bring trouble upon him! As for the military, they won't help you!"

"Why not?"

"Because the one who wants you dead is Wei De—the head of the Directorate of Ceremonial!" Xiahou Lian stared into Xie Jinglan's eyes. "The military chief of Yingtian Prefecture is his godson. If you go there for help, they'll just kill you!"

Xie Jinglan's lips moved soundlessly, his mind whirling with chaos. He covered his face. "What else can I do? What can I do?" His daily study of the Four Books and Five Classics was now useless, offering no help. He pulled at his hair in agony, listening to the wails, shouts, and cries for help interweave into a cacophony.

A fire had broken out somewhere, and the faint glow of the flames illuminated the room. Someone ran past, screaming, "Help! Assass—" The cry was cut short as its speaker fell to the ground like a rag doll, revealing an assassin holding a long saber with both hands. All the assassins were dressed in black, their silver masks glinting in the moonlight. They carried long, bloodstained sabers, moving like silent owls.

"Quick, put on my clothes!" Xiahou Lian handed Xie Jinglan a worn-out knife, then pulled a pouch from near his chest. "This knife is for self-defense. The pouch has a pair of earrings that you can pawn for some silver. Take them. Remember, once you're out, go as far as you can, and *never* tell anyone that your name is Xie Jinglan."

"Where can I go?" Xie Jinglan looked at Xiahou Lian, eyes dark and lifeless. "Tell me, where can I go?" He suddenly lunged at Xiahou Lian, grabbing his neck. "Did you plan to wipe out my family from the moment you entered the manor, Xiahou Lian?" he shouted. "You planned this all

along, didn’t you? What were you doing in the Xie residence? All your talk about your mother coming to get you, about being a thief—it was all lies!”

Xiahou Lian pushed Xie Jinglan to the ground. “Yes, I lied to you! I’m not a thief! But the one who caused the Xie family’s deaths is Xie Bingfeng himself and no one else! Wei De found out that he made the entire household memorize the impeachment memorial against him, and in his fury, Wei De ordered all your deaths!”

Xie Jinglan stared at Xiahou Lian, his eyes bloodshot. Suddenly, they heard someone approaching the door. They both froze.

An assassin pushed the door open with his saber and slowly entered, eyes scanning the dark room. Xiahou Lian and Xie Jinglan hid behind a dustpan and a barrel, peeking out with frightened eyes. The assassin moved between the shelves, poking at the clutter with his blade. His walk was leisurely, as if he were strolling through a garden. One more turn, and he’d be right in front of them.

Xiahou Lian glanced at Xie Jinglan, put on his mask, and quickly crawled out. Hearing the noise, the assassin turned sharply.

“It’s me,” Xiahou Lian said.

“What are you doing here, brat?” the assassin sneered, his expression menacing.

“Can’t a guy take a piss?” Xiahou Lian pretended to straighten his clothes.

“Hmph,” the assassin snorted. “I’d say you’re scared out of your wits and hiding like a coward.”

Xiahou Lian turned his head away, feigning shame at being exposed.

“Spineless coward. Stay hidden, then—don’t wet yourself and embarrass your mother,” the assassin said, tapping Xiahou Lian’s face with his scabbard before laughing and walking out of the room.

Once the assassin was gone, Xie Jinglan crawled out behind Xiahou Lian.

Xiahou Lian bent down and started stripping off his clothes. “Hurry. Change into these,” he whispered.

“Didn’t you say that your mother was one of the best? That you were somebody of high status who no one would dare mess with?” Xie Jinglan stared at Xiahou Lian. “Why did that guy treat you like that?”

Xiahou Lian scratched his head. He *had* made that boast to Xie Jinglan. Now his lie was exposed, but he felt no shame. He simply shoved his clothes into Xie Jinglan’s arms, urging, “Don’t worry about that now, Shaoye. Hurry up and change.”

“What about you? What will happen to you?” Xie Jinglan demanded. “If you let me go, what happens to you?”

“I told you, don’t worry about it!” Xiahou Lian said irritably, grabbing Xie Jinglan and pulling off his clothes. “If you stay here, you’ll die for sure, while I won’t—it’s that simple! Hurry up and put these on. Don’t look back, don’t tremble, and don’t speak! Don’t let anyone find out you’re Xie Jinglan!”

Xie Jinglan looked at him silently for a moment, then lowered his head and dressed in the garments.

“Young master, the world outside is dangerous. Take care of yourself.” Xiahou Lian gripped Xie Jinglan’s shoulders. “Remember, don’t look back, don’t say a word.” Then he opened the door, pushed Xie Jinglan out, and quickly closed it behind him, leaving no time for second thoughts.

The night was heavy, and a cold corpse lay at the bottom of the steps, its hollow eyes staring at Xie Jinglan as if full of lingering hatred. The shadows of the trees loomed ominously, and every dark crevice seemed to hide unknown dangers. Xie Jinglan touched the scabbard at his waist, the cold metal jolting his nerves. He took a step into the perilous night, unsure what lay ahead.

The dark path seemed endless. To reach the side gate, he would have to pass through a garden and two courtyards. He tried to stick to deserted paths, doing his best to ignore the increasingly clear screams and wails around him. His legs felt like they were full of lead, and each step was an immense effort.

Finally, Xie Jinglan reached the garden. Its winding walkways seemed like an endless maze. The lanterns had been extinguished, and all he could see were the faint outlines of trees and rocks.

Close by was a dry well. When an assassin dropped from a tree and peered down it, a terrified scream immediately echoed from its depths. The assassin raised his right hand and shot three darts into the well; the scream instantly fell silent. Xie Jinglan shuddered imperceptibly but forced himself to focus. He continued walking, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the assassin turn to stare at him, a gleaming knife spinning in his fingers. Xie Jinglan forced himself not to look and continued walking steadily, step by step.

As he passed through a gate, he suddenly heard a familiar cry.

“Shaoye! San-shaoye! Where are you?”

He looked up sharply to see Aunt Lan stumbling up the steps, covered in blood. He wanted to run to her, but when she saw his mask and black clothing, she screamed in terror and ran in the opposite direction. He reached out, wanting to call her back—but at that moment, an arrow whistled past his ear.

His mind immediately seemed to drag as if stuck in mud, his thoughts and movements slowing to a crawl. He watched the arrow pass before his eyes, its intricate patterns glinting in the light.

The arrow slowly—so slowly—pierced Aunt Lan’s back. A ripple of red bloomed there, and she let out a horrible scream as she collapsed to the ground, never to rise again.

“Your side clear?”

“Done. Let’s check on old Duan.”

An assassin rushed past, bumping Xie Jinglan’s shoulder. Xie Jinglan stood frozen, like a puppet without any strings. Aunt Lan’s body lay in a pool of dark blood that spread like ink on paper.

Out of the corner of his eye, Xie Jinglan saw the assassin with the spinning knife reappear. He stood in the shadow of a tree and silently watched Xie Jinglan.

“Xiahou Lian,” the assassin called, his voice as clear as a flowing spring. “What’re you doing?”

Fear crept into Xie Jinglan’s heart like frost, and his body trembled uncontrollably.

Don’t look back. Don’t tremble. Don’t be afraid.

Xie Jinglan clenched his fists and stomped past Aunt Lan’s body. The thick smell of blood assaulted his senses, making him want to vomit. Gritting his teeth, he passed her corpse. Under the mask, tears streamed down his face, dripping from his chin as he turned the corner.

He was almost there. Almost there. He could see the slightly open gate, and he walked steadily toward it, resisting the urge to run. In the alley beyond the gate, an assassin played hopscotch, his long saber propped against the wall. He noticed Xie Jinglan and stopped; his gaze was like ice.

Xie Jinglan turned stiffly and walked toward the other end of the alley. One step, another step, another. He was almost at the corner, almost out of the assassin’s sight.

“Hey, where’re you going?” the assassin suddenly called from behind him.

Xie Jinglan froze.

“The temple block hasn’t sounded yet. The rule is that you can’t leave.”

Xie Jinglan didn’t respond.

“Hey. Are you mute?”

Should he answer? No, he couldn’t speak—his voice would reveal him. Xie Jinglan’s mind raced, but he couldn’t think of a way out.

Another voice suddenly spoke: “Let him go back. It’s his first time out. He’s probably scared out of his wits.”

Xie Jinglan turned and saw the assassin with the spinning knife. Beneath the moonlight, his eyes were gentle as water.

“Tch. Coward,” scoffed the hopscotch-playing assassin.

Supporting himself against the wall, Xie Jinglan turned the corner, then took a few steps before breaking into a sprint. The Xie residence fell farther and farther behind him, but the nightmare of blood and flame tailed him like a shadow. Aunt Lan’s blood-soaked corpse seemed to hover before his eyes. Whether they were open or closed, her broken body remained, impossible to escape.

Just moments ago, he'd been crying and shouting about saving Aunt Lan. Faced with the assassins, though, he'd been paralyzed with fear. He was a coward—a coward!

Tripping on a stone, Xie Jinglan fell down hard, scraping his face and hands. He lay there, his fists pounding the ground until they were bloody, leaving crimson streaks on the filthy earth.

When his hands grew sore, he got up, then sat against the wall. The street was empty, and the lanterns hanging under the eaves looked like floating will-o'-the-wisps.

Suddenly, he realized that he had no home to return to—no place to go. He had seldom left the Xie residence. To him, the small city of Jinling was the whole world. Where could he go now? Who could he turn to—Dai-xiansheng? No. He was too close. Seeking him out would only endanger him. Did Xie Jinglan have any other relatives? No—he had no maternal family to rely on, nor did he know of any distant family. He was like a fledgling bird that couldn't find its nest, foundering in the cold wind.

This was, without a doubt, all because of that scoundrel Wei De. He was the one who'd ordered Qiye Garden to wipe out the Xie family, the one responsible for killing Aunt Lan. Suddenly, Xie Jinglan had a purpose, which he clung to like a drowning man clutching a piece of driftwood. He would take revenge, whether against Wei De or Qiye Garden. He would make sure they perished in the wilderness like dogs!

Xie Jinglan struggled to his feet and staggered into the endless night. He knew that the third young master of the Xie family had died that evening. From then on, he would be a ghost.

Chapter 18:
Fallen Waves

THE COURTYARD WAS FULL of corpses, the gutters streaming with blood. The assassins were counting the bodies when a tall man clad in black dragged Xiahou Lian over by the collar and tossed him onto the pile. Xiahou Lian's white undergarments were instantly soaked with blood, its stench overwhelming his nostrils and turning his stomach. As he struggled to his feet, he glimpsed Xie Bingfeng's and Lady Xiao's bodies. They were still locked in an embrace, their faces frozen in grotesque expressions of terror.

The assassins encircled Xiahou Lian, staring.

"Mahoraga, what happened?" asked Uncle Duan.

The Mahoraga removed his mask to reveal a cold, stern face. "He let someone escape."

Uncle Duan glanced at Xiahou Lian, then asked, "Who?"

The assassin who'd been playing hopscotch earlier chimed in. "I don't know. He gave whoever it was his clothes and mask. The Kinnara and I thought it was him, so we let them go. Right, Kinnara?"

Qiu Ye didn't speak. He simply patted Xiahou Lian on the head.

"Who gave you the gall to let our prey escape, Xiahou Lian?" asked one assassin coldly.

Another assassin laughed. "Must've been the Garuda. His mother's achievements give him more than enough confidence—there's nothing he won't do. Once, he even plucked all the feathers off my hen."

"I've checked," the assassin counting the bodies reported. "All hundred and eight members of the Xie household are here."

The assassins exchanged glances. "Are you sure?" asked the Mahoraga.

"I'm sure," the assassin replied.

The hopscotch-playing assassin protested, “I definitely saw someone wearing his clothes leave, though. They also had your dagger, Uncle Duan.”

Uncle Duan wasn’t at liberty to mourn his lost weapon. “I think we can let this one go. We’re not short any heads, so it’s not the end of the world.” Turning to the Mahoraga, he added, “No need to be so hard on a child.”

“A child?” the Mahoraga sneered. “I’ve been killing people since I was twelve. No one ever told *me* that I was still a child. Besides, the abbot is strict and impartial. If he finds out, we’ll all be whipped.”

Uncle Duan sighed and turned to scold Xiahou Lian. “Tell us, you brat! Who did you let go? You always cause trouble the moment I take my eyes off you!”

“A young girl of the Xie household,” Xiahou Lian replied hoarsely.

“Why wasn’t her name on our list?” asked the Mahoraga.

Xiahou Lian mixed his lie with some truth. “Xie Bingfeng always neglected her. And he was so offended over something she’d said that he didn’t even have her memorize the memorial. They probably never even added her name to the Xie household registry.”

“Where did she go?” the Mahoraga pressed.

“I’m not sure.”

The Mahoraga drew a dagger and pressed it to Xiahou Lian’s chin, forcing the boy to look into his cold eyes. “Don’t play games. Spit out everything you know.”

Xiahou Lian met his gaze without flinching.

Something glinted in Qiu Ye’s fingertips, and a blade as thin as a cicada’s wing pressed against the Mahoraga’s wrist. Qiu Ye smiled. “Qiye Garden forbids unauthorized punishment.”

The Mahoraga narrowed his eyes. “Are you trying to protect him, Kinnara?”

Qiu Ye calmly increased the blade’s pressure on the Mahoraga’s wrist, forcing the other man to lower the dagger. His smile didn’t waver. “I’m simply upholding the temple’s rules.”

The Mahoraga didn’t argue further and reluctantly sheathed his dagger.

In Qiye Garden, the authority of the Eight Legions was second only to the abbot. The seven legions other than the Garuda were evenly matched in strength. Qiu Ye was famous for Qiushui, a double-edged blade as thin as a cicada’s wing that was designed to be held between his fingers. His fingertips twirled it endlessly. Qiu Ye had assassinated countless master martial artists, but it was his role as Qiye Garden’s executioner that truly stirred fear. He was the leader of the Hall of Executions’ assassins, so any traitor to Qiye Garden would meet their end under his blade.

The Mahoraga was also one of the Eight Legions, however. Even Qiu Ye had to show him some respect.

“So you still remember the temple’s rules? Then, as the executioner, do you know what punishment Xiahou Lian deserves for letting our prey escape?” The Mahoraga’s gaze turned sinister. “To be killed without mercy,” he said, enunciating each word.

“Even if he is to be killed without mercy, the abbot must order his execution before I can carry it out,” Qiu Ye said.

Seeing that the two were about to come to blows, Uncle Duan pulled them apart. “Enough, both of you. Right now, our priority is to find that young girl.” He directed a question at Xiahou Lian: “What’s her name?”

“Xie Jinglan,” Xiahou Lian replied. “‘Jing’ as in ‘quiet,’ and ‘lan’ as in ‘orchid.’”

“The kid is lying,” an old-sounding voice suddenly interjected. Xiahou Lian turned his head to see the Qiye Garden mole who’d once given him a saber manual and medicine. The elderly man approached them slowly, leaning on a cane.

Now Xiahou Lian was done for. Deceiving these fools would now be impossible.

“The Xie household has only one Xie Jinglan. He’s a boy—and he’s also the young master Xiahou Lian served. This kid’s too tenderhearted—he probably developed feelings for him.” The old man tapped Xiahou Lian’s skull with his cane and shook his head. “I told you before that you weren’t cut out to be an assassin. See? Now you’ve made a mess.”

Damn meddler. Xiahou Lian clenched his fists.

“This kid is cunning and full of lies! We won’t get anything out of him without torturing him first,” an assassin from the back weighed in.

Qiu Ye glanced at the man and repeated, “Unauthorized punishment is forbidden in Qiye Garden. We’ll deal with this back at the temple.”

“Why would it be unauthorized? We can’t answer to Wei-gonggong without retrieving the escaped prey. Otherwise, the Garden’s reputation will be ruined, and then what? If the abbot were here, he’d definitely extract our prey’s whereabouts through torture,” the man sneered. “Or is the mighty Kinnara afraid that the Garuda will come after you if she returns to find out that you punished her son?”

The Mahoraga sneered. “Don’t worry, Kinnara. We haven’t heard from Xiahou Pei in three months. She probably died in the Western Regions.”

“You’re full of shit!” Xiahou Lian shouted with reddened eyes. “Fuck you! You’ll be eaten by ants before anything kills my mother!”

“Shut up, Xiahou Lian!” roared Uncle Duan.

Qiu Ye held Xiahou Lian’s head to stop his flailing. He sighed. “You’re only partially correct. I am afraid of the Garuda. But I’m also afraid of the abbot.”

“What do you mean?” asked the Mahoraga suspiciously.

Qiu Ye smiled. “Haven’t any of you ever wondered who Xiahou Lian’s father is?”

“You mean... No, impossible!”

The assassins were all stunned.

Qiu Ye chuckled softly, his voice low and clear. “That’s right. Xiahou Lian’s father is our abbot, the Shixin Buddha.”

There was neither surprise nor joy on Xiahou Lian’s face. He stood there frowning, as if he preferred not to hear the abbot’s name.

“How is that possible?” an assassin asked. “Why would the abbot and Xiahou Pei want to have a child? And why would the abbot ignore Xiahou Lian all these years?”

Uncle Duan sighed. “The abbot wouldn’t, but Xiahou Pei would. Over a decade ago, the abbot was quite handsome...”

The expression on each assassin’s face became complex. The abbot must have struggled to keep this secret shame concealed for so many years. No one dared to comment.

The Mahoraga played with his dagger, sneering. “I doubt the abbot ever meant to acknowledge this kid. Don’t forget, the abbot took Xiahou Lian’s twin brother, Chiyan, at birth. Supposedly, the abbot has been raising and teaching him diligently on Heimianfo Peak. Under his guidance, Chiyan has already mastered Qiye Garden’s saber techniques. Both boys are his sons, so why does he ignore one and pour all his effort into the other?”

“Maybe the abbot and the Garuda agreed to take a child each and go their separate ways,” someone suggested.

Twin brother? Xiahou Lian was shocked. He’d never known that he had a brother. He looked up to ask Qiu Ye about it, but the man’s grave expression forced Xiahou Lian to swallow his words.

“The abbot never intended on keeping him,” said the Mahoraga, “so I doubt he’ll care if we deal with him.”

Most of the assassins nodded in agreement. Xiahou Pei had always been eccentric and self-centered, and many in Qiye Garden disliked or held grudges against her. Now that they had a chance to punish her son, no one was keen on wasting it.

Still, someone asked, “But what if Xiahou Pei returns...?”

“I already told you, that woman’s probably dead—” the Mahoraga replied coldly.

Before he could finish, a long saber cut through the cold night air, shooting toward the Mahoraga’s head. The Mahoraga drew his blade quickly and deflected the attack. The saber spun in midair and landed in a slender hand.

Everyone turned to see a woman emerge from the darkness, her figure slender as a crane’s. Illuminated by the moonlight, her cheeks shone as brilliantly pink as roses, her lips were fire red, and her eyebrows were as

sharp as blades. Despite its powerful aura of bloodlust, her face was breathtakingly beautiful.

The woman's mouth curved into a provocative smile. "Who says I died in the Western Regions?"

Xiahou Lian's eyes lit up. "Mother!" he shouted.

Everyone was stunned to see Xiahou Pei. She had disappeared into the Western Regions for three months, yet here she was, alive and well. Her return could mean only one thing: The Chakravarti had fallen at her hands. All eyes were drawn to the bulging, bloodstained snakeskin bag at her waist. There was no doubt that it contained the Chakravarti's head.

The Chakravarti had killed three of the Garden's top assassins yet had ultimately been slain by Xiahou Pei's hand. Her skills with the saber were unmatched in the Garden, second only to those of the abbot.

Fear filled the Mahoraga's eyes as he subtly stepped backward.

"Well, isn't this unfortunate? I didn't lose so much as an arm or a leg. I'm so sorry that I've come back unharmed and dashed your long-held hopes." Xiahou Pei pulled Xiahou Lian to her side, her grin dangerous and mocking. Her smiles were always menacing; that sight alone filled others with trepidation.

Hiding his fear, the Mahoraga said coldly, "Xiahou Pei, your son let a young lady from the Xie family escape. Don't assume being the strongest of the Eight Legions means you can just sweep this under the rug!"

The old man from earlier coughed. "A young *master*," he corrected the Mahoraga.

Xiahou Pei shrugged. "Do you think I'm a coward, like you? I don't need to sweep anything under the rug. Hey, Qiu Ye, what's the Garden's penalty for permitting escape?"

"According to the rules, Xiahou Lian should be executed," Qiu Ye answered. "But in this case, I suspect the abbot might show some leniency."

Xiahou Pei looked down at Xiahou Lian. "If you let him go, you must've paid that careful thought first, correct?"

Xiahou Lian nodded. "I did."

“Then what do you want to do? Meekly accept your punishment or fight to the death? If you pick the first option, I’ll take you back to the mountain. If you pick the second, I’ll kill everyone here, and we’ll go on the run together.”

Even Xiahou Lian was stunned by his mother’s boldness. He knew she was powerful—but to the point of taking on *twenty* top Garden assassins?

The assassins all erupted at once. They pointed at Xiahou Pei, shouting. “Xiahou Pei, you’re so arrogant! Even if you could kill us all, the Seven Fifteen you’ve taken will kill *you* sooner or later!”

“Then I’ll just live as long as I can. Why worry about the rest?” Xiahou Pei laughed, then asked Xiahou Lian, “So, what’s your choice, son?”

“Can you really beat them all?” Xiahou Lian asked suspiciously.

“Of course not, but my Xiao-Lian has grown up. He has a sweetheart! What’s her name again? Right—Xie Jinglan. What does she look like? Is she as pretty as Lady Liu?”

Xiahou Lian blushed with embarrassment. “Mother... Please don’t joke around.” Still, he couldn’t help thinking that Xie Jinglan was far more beautiful than someone like Lady Liu, who had to envelop herself in blush and powder.

“Ha ha ha! All right. Listen, son, do what you like—but you must bear the consequences of your choice. Whatever you decide, I’ll stand by you. Even if it costs me my life.” Xiahou Pei hugged Xiahou Lian, a radiance like that of stars in the night sky eclipsing the bloodlust in her eyes.

All Xiahou Lian’s anxiety vanished, and he swelled with courage. He now felt he could face anything. Wiping the dirt from his face, he took a deep breath.

All the assassins stepped back, then slowly began to slide their sabers from their scabbards.

Having worked with Xiahou Pei for years, every assassin knew that she was a madwoman. She always worked alone, refusing backup or

support. New assassins admired her bravery, attributing it to an unshakable will to win. But those who'd known her longer understood that she was determined not to win but to die.

All people valued their lives, but Xiahou Pei feared neither life nor death. She considered the lives of her prey as trivial as an ant's and regarded her own life the same way. That was how she had become Qiye Garden's sharpest blade.

All the gathered assassins took her at her word. If Xiahou Lian chose to run, Xiahou Pei would draw her saber, the world-renowned Hengbo. Killing all the assassins might not be possible, but her skills could still ensure that more than a few of their number wouldn't live to see the next day.

This madwoman, they cursed in their hearts. *Madwoman!*

Finally, Xiahou Lian spoke. "I'll accept my punishment, Mother. Take me back to the mountain."

Chapter 19:
Holding Life and Death

XIE JINGLAN had lost track of how far he'd walked.

His black garments were tattered, stained with dust and grime. His hair was a tangled mess, his face streaked with dirt—he hadn't washed either for days. He felt as if a rusty piece of metal were lodged in his parched throat, impossible to cough up or swallow. Even his saliva tasted of blood. But a worse torment was his hunger—the way his empty stomach ached from famishment. He felt lightheaded, the world spinning around him.

He had planned to pawn the earrings he'd been given for travel expenses before leaving Jinling, but the shopkeeper had accused him of stealing and confiscated them. He'd even called his servants to beat the boy. Xie Jinglan had fled in a panic, only to realize he'd left his dagger behind in the shop.

He hadn't eaten for so long that he resorted to scavenging scraps from the kitchen waste dumped near restaurants, although those seemingly preferred to feed their leftovers to pigs, rather than beggars. More often than not, they sent their staff out with brooms to chase Xie Jinglan away.

A few days earlier, he'd seen a boy, no more than five or six years old, sitting on a house's doorstep and nibbling a sugar cake while watching passersby. Xie Jinglan had stood behind a wall, staring hungrily at the small confection clutched in the boy's hand as if it were the last morsel in the world. His hunger urged him to snatch the cake, while his rationality told him that robbing a child would be shameful. He'd struggled, mind torn.

When only one bite of the cake remained, he finally gave in. Darting past the child, he snatched what remained of the small sugar-coated cake. At first, the child continued to crouch in place, hand still cupping an invisible cake. By the time he realized what had happened, Xie Jinglan was long gone, and the boy burst out crying, stumbling back into the house to tearfully complain.

Xie Jinglan crouched in a nearby alley, swallowing the last bite of the cake with tears in his own eyes. From then on, he roamed the streets like a stray dog searching for bones, seeking out food in the hands of weak, vulnerable children. Adults sometimes caught and beat him, yet he managed to steal barely enough to fill his stomach.

Later, Xie Jinglan walked and walked and lost any idea of where he was. The fields in the countryside were dry and cracked, like an old man's shrivelled skin. All around him were starving refugees. Some traveled with their families, and others walked alone. Everyone was equally destitute, so there was nothing left to steal.

At times, he saw emaciated children with horrifically swollen bellies, the result of eating clay. They lay on the ground, pale-lipped and waiting to die. Eventually, he stopped seeing children or the elderly on the roads at all. Terrified of being captured and cannibalized, Xie Jinglan stuck to remote, deserted paths. When he was famished, he plucked wild grass to stave off his hunger.

Thoughts of food and water consumed his mind. He no longer had the energy to hate Wei De or to reminisce. He didn't care whether Qiye Garden would find him one night while he slept curled in some corner. All he cared about was filling his belly. Nothing else mattered.

The only possessions he still had were the black clothes and mask Xiahou Lian had given him. He kept the mask hidden in his lapels, afraid that someone might see it and take it away.

Later, he remembered Xiahou Lian saying that they would meet again if Xie Jinglan placed a copper coin at the highest point in the city, so he went to the bell tower and climbed to the top. The scorching sun made him squint his eyes, and his legs were so weak that every step felt like walking on cotton. Still, he clambered up and placed the mask next to the large bell. His arrival startled the pigeons in front of the bell; they flapped their wings and scattered in all directions.

By the time Xiahou Lian arrived, Xie Jinglan would probably already be dead from starvation. Xie Jinglan leaned against the wall, drifting in and out of consciousness.

Then he felt sweet water trickling into his mouth. Suddenly coming to, he grabbed at the canteen and gulped its contents down. A steamed bun

was placed in front of him next. Xie Jinglan snatched it up and began wolfing it down.

“Slow down, slow down. Don’t choke,” the man with him said, smiling and patting Xie Jinglan’s back.

Xie Jinglan peered up. The man before him looked like a scholar. His eyes exuded warmth and gentleness, like still water.

Swallowing a mouthful of the bun, Xie Jinglan rasped, “I know you.”

“Oh?”

“That night at the Xie residence. You were the one who let me go.” Xie Jinglan’s eyes reddened as he recalled the slaughter that night.

“So you did notice,” Qiu Ye said with a faint smile. “You and Xiao-Lian have a similar build, but your postures while walking, as well as your gazes when you look at others, are entirely different. I often disguise myself, so while your little trick might’ve fooled the other assassins, it wasn’t enough to fool me.”

“You may have let me go, but you’re still one of the killers who destroyed my family. I refuse to thank you.”

“I don’t expect your gratitude.”

“Where’s Xiahou Lian? Why didn’t he come?”

Qiu Ye’s eyes darkened, and he didn’t answer directly. Instead he said, “You shouldn’t have pulled out that mask here. If Qiye Garden finds it, you’ll be killed. You’re lucky it was me who came across it, or Xiao-Lian’s efforts would’ve been in vain.”

“What’s the difference between starving to death and being killed by you?”

Qiu Ye pressed a piece of silver into his palm. “Take care of yourself. Xiao-Lian traded his life for yours. You shouldn’t waste his sacrifice.”

Xie Jinglan was startled. “Xiahou Lian... What happened to him? He promised he wouldn’t be killed.”

Qiu Ye’s expression turned mournful as he gazed south. “By helping you escape assassination, he violated Qiye Garden’s rules. The abbot sentenced him to eighty-one lashes. When I left, he was still in bed,

unconscious. I don’t know how he’s doing now, but no news is good news. Xiao-Lian has always been strong-willed. He’ll be fine.”

“What about the Garuda? Isn’t he her son? Why didn’t she save him?!”

“The temple’s rules are strict. Even the Garuda cannot defy them.” Qiu Ye looked at Xie Jinglan, his gaze growing more serious. “Xiao-Lian must care a lot about you if he told you that the Garuda is his mother.”

Xie Jinglan looked away. “He didn’t tell me. I figured it out myself.”

Qiu Ye sighed. “Today will be the last time we meet. Don’t come looking for Xiao-Lian again. You’re registered in Qiye Garden’s books as our prey—the assassins will hunt you like hounds. Head to the capital. There are many wealthy people there, and you won’t starve like you might elsewhere. Maybe you’ll even run into a palace noble who’ll give you porridge.”

Xie Jinglan was stunned. Would he really never see Xiahou Lian again?

“Farewell and good luck, little young master.” With that, Qiu Ye stepped onto the city wall, smiling at Xie Jinglan, then leaned back and fell, his inky hair fluttering in the wind like silk.

By the time Xie Jinglan leaned out to look, Qiu Ye had vanished, whisked away like a leaf on the wind.

After that, Xie Jinglan followed Qiu Ye’s advice, joining the flow of refugees heading to the capital. With their blank, dust-covered faces and eyes and lips drained of color, they looked like clay dolls or walking corpses. Their shoes had worn through, exposing their dirty toes. Fortunately, the weather was warm enough not to chill the bare parts of their feet.

After three days of being turned away at the capital city gates, Xie Jinglan managed to sneak in during a refugee riot. The city’s corners were already full of sleeping vagrants in tattered clothes, their limbs wasted away to skin and bone. Soldiers sifted the crowds in order to load the dead onto carts for mass burials.

Xie Jinglan didn’t linger, walking numbly in the direction of the imperial palace. As the sky darkened, lanterns flamed to life along the streets, and light flooded the area until it shone bright as day. Carriages and horses filled the streets, and fireworks burst in the air. As they arced through the sky after exploding, their deafening sounds grew fainter and fainter, until they seemed like noises from a different world entirely.

It was the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Xie Jinglan felt nothing. He simply blended into the crowd and silently pickpocketed a purse for himself. Suddenly, the crowd split as if forced apart. Everyone stepped back as a four-horse carriage rumbled down the street, leaving two long, straight tracks in its wake. Behind the carriage trotted two rows of Eastern Depot agents on horseback, carrying black sabers. Their black clothing bore insignias depicting bared teeth and claws; their faces were cold and expressionless, like demonic Asuras of the night. Whispers spread through the crowd.

“What a sight! Wei-gonggong’s authority has reached new heights! If a mere eunuch can become so influential, what’s the point of being a proper scholar these days?”

“Are you trying to get yourself killed? Watch your tongue, or the agents will take your life.”

“Hey, I heard that one of the palace eunuchs will be recruiting at Dong’an Gate tomorrow at noon. Maybe we should try our luck. Who knows, one day I could be head of the Eastern Depot!”

“That’s a sure way to end your family line. You go ahead—I won’t be joining you.”

Out of nowhere, a disheveled beggar rushed from the crowd, brandishing a string of firecrackers. “Eunuch Wei!” he roared at the carriage. “The six prefectures of Shandong are overrun with starving people, yet you sit here on your laurels!” The firecrackers popped and sparked as the beggar hurled them toward the carriage, attempting to startle the horses. An agent intercepted the firecrackers mid-flight, however, tossing them aside.

Another agent swiftly dismounted and seized the beggar. The beggar struggled fiercely, shouting, “Eunuch Wei, you’ve brought disaster to the

nation! The six provinces of Shandong are on their last legs! Oh, heavens, can’t you see?!”

Swearing, the agent dislocated the beggar’s jaw, then broke his arms and legs. The beggar fell limp, like a bag of old clothes, his eyes wide and bloodshot.

From inside the carriage, a hand draped with prayer beads emerged. It made a slight gesture.

At that signal, the agent drew his saber and slashed the beggar’s throat. Blood sprayed in a fountain, and the beggar twitched a few times before falling still.

As the beggar’s body was carried away, the carriage rolled forward. The crowd reconvened as noise swelled once more. Vendors hawked goods, and the sound of thundering drums filled the air.

In this world, a person’s death was like a grain of sand swept away by the tide—unnoticed and leaving no trace to be found.

Wei De. So the man in the carriage was the eunuch. Xie Jinglan slowly clenched his fists as he watched the carriage disappear around the corner.

If Xie Jinglan gained immense power one day, would he be able to make decisions about life and death with a wave of his hand? Would a single moment of his anger wipe out countless lives and ruin entire families? Wei De stood below only one man and above ten thousand, so Xie Jinglan would have to stand above *all*, with ten thousand times ten thousand below him. From then on, anyone who wronged, hurt, or betrayed him would find themselves reduced to ashes. Dukes and nobles would bow before him, and even royal heirs would kneel at his feet.

Xie Jinglan lifted his head, his eyes dark and impenetrable chasms. Within the depths of his heart, a demon slowly opened its eyes.

The moon set, and the sun rose. Shops opened their doors, and noodle vendors in their stalls began to work their dough. Xie Jinglan buried Xiahou Lian’s mask beneath an old pagoda tree in an alley and marked the spot. Then he stood, straightened his clothes in the sunlight, and walked out of the alley. A long line had already formed at Dong’an Gate.

Some of the men there had already castrated themselves, their clothing stained with blood as they shuffled weakly in line. Others, deemed too old, were driven from the queue. Tumbling to the ground, they sobbed and begged to join the palace eunuchs.

When it was at last Xie Jinglan's turn, the eunuch taking names glanced at him and asked indifferently, "How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"What's your name, and where are you from?"

"I'm from Jinling." Xie Jinglan paused. Then, noticing the jade pendant on the eunuch's waist, he continued, "My name is Shen Jue —'jue'[14] as in a jade pendant."

The eunuch wrote *Shen Jue* on a wooden plaque and handed it to Xie Jinglan. Holding the plaque, Xie Jinglan followed the other beggars who'd been chosen, and they arrived at the towering palace gates. The vermilion gates slowly opened, revealing the endless imperial road and countless palace doors. Beneath the palace walls, those in line looked like a trail of ants, small and fragile.

The heavy gates began to swing closed behind Xie Jinglan. He turned his head. Just before the gates slammed shut, a last ray of sunlight fell upon him, illuminating his expressionless face.

Chapter 20:
Silence in the Palace

THE EVENING DRUM echoed six times as the distant mountains melted into the dusk. Dark clouds loomed heavy over the palace as the sun peeked sporadically through the gaps. Using long poles, eunuchs hung lanterns on iron hooks under the eaves. The palace gradually brightened beneath the soft glow of the swaying lanterns, which transformed into a brilliant sea of light once the entire palace was adorned with them. Only the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard remained shrouded in darkness, its bare eaves festooned only with lonely iron wind chimes. This was the most desolate corner of the Forbidden City.

A woman in red sat on the wall, waving a handkerchief. Her eyes were like old, empty wells, dark and lifeless. “Your Majesty... Your Majesty... I miss you so much. Why won’t you come to see me?”

“Oh no, Consort Gao! How did you get up there again? If the chief eunuch sees this, Xiao-Juezi and I will both be punished!” Sixi lamented, frantic. Tucking his skirt into his belt, he clambered carefully up the ladder to Consort Gao. His plump body wobbled on the ladder; from a distance, he looked like a skewered meatball.

Consort Gao had been sent to the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard earlier that year. Rumor had it she’d scattered red beans on the garden path where Imperial Noble Consort Ma often walked, hoping to cause her to slip and miscarry. When the plot was exposed, she was imprisoned and tortured by the Imperial Clan Court until she went mad. The Fourth Qianxi Courtyard had already housed three other mad consorts, and with Consort Gao’s arrival, Sixi was overwhelmed. His already receding hairline had moved even farther back.

Just as Sixi was reaching the end of his rope, a young eunuch around fourteen years old walked in, dressed in green. He placed a box of food on the table.

“Come down!” he called. “It’s time to eat!”

Hearing that, Consort Gao quickly urged Sixi to descend, then climbed down herself, holding her skirt. She sat meekly at the table, waiting for the young eunuch to serve her.

Sixi breathed a sigh of relief. “You’re really something, Shen Jue.”

Shen Jue set the bowls and chopsticks on the table. His eyebrows and lowered eyes were as serene as a painting, their lines like ink-washed landscapes. At fourteen, he’d grown rapidly, a willow sprig stretching toward the sun. Still, years of poor nutrition had left his face pale, giving him a fragile, sickly appearance.

Sixi’s gaze drifted down to Shen Jue’s slender fingers. The boy’s nails were neatly trimmed; he didn’t have a single hangnail. Desire flamed in Sixi, and he reached out to caress the back of Shen Jue’s hand, whispering, “Xiao-Juezi, have you thought about what I mentioned the other day?”

Shen Jue smoothly withdrew his hand with a mocking smirk. “I’ve heard of eunuchs and maids pairing off, but never just two eunuchs.”

“Ah, you don’t understand,” Sixi said. His beady eyes narrowed, and a lecherous glint shone through. “We eunuchs are castrated, so how are we any different from women? When eunuchs and maids get together, they often rely on...tools to get things done. The same goes for two eunuchs...”

Shen Jue’s good looks had long attracted Sixi. Fortunately, Shen Jue had been assigned to the cold palace, a desolate place where only crows flew about. Had the boy been assigned to a favored concubine’s residence instead, Sixi would have had no chance, considering his plumpness.

But Shen Jue refused to yield, however Sixi tried to seduce him. Only after Sixi hinted at using force to satisfy his desires did Shen Jue show signs of trepidation and soften his attitude a bit. If not for that, Sixi couldn’t have gotten this close to him.

“What—are you so desperate for me?” Shen Jue sneered, eyes full of disgust.

“Of course,” Sixi said. He was accustomed to Shen Jue’s sarcasm and didn’t take it to heart. With a sycophantic smile, he continued, “My feelings for you are as clear as the heavens and earth. Haven’t I always treated you warmly despite your cold shoulder? Don’t worry. Once you’re mine, I’ll

have my godfather transfer me from this wretched cold palace to the imperial stables. I'll take you with me, and we won't have to suffer here anymore."

Sixi had recently spent a few taels of silver to become the godson of the imperial stables' chief eunuch. He hadn't yet left the cold palace, but he was already convinced of his own imminent rise to power. Lately, he'd strutted around as if he owned the place.

Shen Jue stirred the rice in his bowl. "Fine," he said nonchalantly. Sixi seemed overjoyed, and Shen Jue's lips curled into a cold smile. "I'll come to your room tonight at midnight."

"Good, good! I'll be waiting." Sixi was unable to contain his excitement. He reached out to grab Shen Jue's hands.

The boy stepped back, avoiding Sixi's grasp, then tossed his chopsticks onto the table with a flick of his hand. "You can eat without me. I've lost my appetite."

Sixi wanted to pursue him, but Consort Gao suddenly grabbed him. "I'm starving! I'm starving!" she shrieked. "I haven't eaten my fill!"

"Eat, eat! Eat until you burst!" Sixi snapped.

Shen Jue closed the door. His room was cold and quiet. He'd left the lattice window open, and flower petals had drifted onto his desk, dusting his open book. He shut the window and made his way to the washbasin, where he scrubbed his right hand—the one Sixi had touched—over and over until his skin turned red. The thought of Sixi's face made him nauseous. In a fit of anger, Shen Jue overturned the basin and kicked a stool over. Only then did he feel slight relief.

After the long day of work, he felt sticky and uncomfortable. He fetched some water and brought it back to his room to bathe. The warm water washed away his fatigue. As he splashed his face, droplets dripped from his lashes like morning dew from a flower's petals.

As he dried off, a loud clatter came from outside the window. Shen Jue turned sharply, threw on his clothes, and pushed the window open to find a shattered flowerpot on the ground.

Sixi returned to his room, his heart pounding. His mind full of indecent thoughts, he'd gone and crouched under Shen Jue's window; weakening the paper pane with saliva, he poked a hole in it to spy on Shen Jue bathing. He'd been shocked to discover Shen Jue's secret—a secret that could cost Shen Jue his life. A maniacal look spread across Sixi's face. Now, Shen Jue would have no choice but to submit to him.

After drinking some tea to compose himself, Sixi sat at his desk, eagerly awaiting nightfall. Suddenly, Shen Jue threw the door open. He stood just beyond the threshold, his expression dark.

Sixi knew exactly why the boy was there but pretended otherwise. He assumed an insincere smile. "It's not midnight yet. I didn't expect such eagerness."

Shen Jue stepped inside. The room reeked with a indescribable stench, and he covered his nose in disgust, scanning the chamber. He wore only an underrobe with a thin coat draped atop it. His hair was still wet from his bath, and water droplets trailed down his neck, soaking into his collar. His pale skin glistened like jade wet with dew. Sixi stared transfixed at Shen Jue's slender white neck, nearly drooling.

Eunuchs were strange creatures. Though they'd been castrated, their desires were undiminished and in fact grew even less restrained. Both men and women were fair game to them—and those who were neither were even more so.

Rumors of eunuchs torturing and killing their partners were rampant in the palace. Their victims' bodies were said to be mangled beyond recognition. But the palace wasn't a just place. At most, perpetrators received a few lashes, and the violence only accelerated. If the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard hadn't been full of madwomen, its audacious eunuchs might even have targeted the nearby imperial consorts.

Shen Jue looked at Sixi coldly. "You saw everything, didn't you?"

"Saw what?" Sixi's eyes gleamed with malice.

"Don't play games with me. What do you want? Speak." Shen Jue rummaged casually through Sixi's desk drawers, pulling out strings of jewelry—likely stolen from some other palace courtyard.

“You know what I want,” Sixi said, leering. He leaned in closer and smoothly ran his fingers through Shen Jue’s hair. “All I want is you. I’ve dreamed of you, tossing and turning, night after night.” Shen Jue’s hair was cool beneath Sixi’s palm; every thin strand that brushed against him tickled his heart. Sixi had already imagined a hundred ways to “cherish” Shen Jue, eagerly anticipating the moment Shen Jue would beg for mercy.

“And if I refuse?” Shen Jue’s eyes darkened.

“You can’t,” Sixi whispered into Shen Jue’s ear. “I know your secret. If you want to keep your head and your place in the palace, you’ll obey me. If I spread the word, that little head of yours won’t stay on your neck long.”

“Is that so?” Shen Jue smiled coldly. His hand quietly reached into a drawer, pulling out a pair of scissors. Wrapping his arm around Sixi, he touched their sharp tips to the man’s back.

“Of course, I’ll treat you well,” Sixi said, assuming that Shen Jue was yielding at last. Overjoyed, he returned Shen Jue’s embrace, greedily inhaling his soapy scent.

Suddenly, sharp pain shot through Sixi’s back, and his face contorted in agony. He stared at Shen Jue in disbelief. Shen Jue stared back coldly. His gaze wasn’t that of a person looking at another human being—it was the look a person would give a corpse.

Sixi reached behind his back. His palm came away sticky and wet. As his blood continued to gush, he let out a piglike squeal of pain. Shen Jue grabbed a garment from the chair and stuffed it into Sixi’s mouth. Eyes bulging with rage, Sixi clutched Shen Jue’s hand in a death grip, but his own hands gradually lost their strength. In the end, they finally slipped from Shen Jue’s fingers to the ground. Only Sixi’s eyes, round as copper bells, remained open, as if he was trying to etch Shen Jue’s face into his memory. As if, one night, he would return as a spirit and exact his revenge.

Once Sixi was completely lifeless, Shen Jue removed his coat and wrapped it around Sixi’s wound to stem its bleeding. Then he hoisted Sixi onto his back. Outside, he threw the man into a dry well. No one but Shen Jue knew that the dry well in the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard led to a desolate forest outside the palace walls. Shen Jue had discovered that while cleaning the library, where he’d found an old map of the palace dating back to a previous dynasty.

Shen Jue returned to his room to change into warmer clothes; his fragile body still couldn't withstand the cold. Then he grabbed a rope and returned to the well, climbing down to pull Sixi's body deeper into the tunnel. Sixi was heavy, and it took all Shen Jue's strength to drag him to a suitable spot. Moving the body outside of the palace entirely would've taken too long, and Shen Jue still had to clean up the blood in Sixi's room.

By the time Shen Jue climbed back out of the well, night had fallen. As he emerged, he saw a young boy in black lying near the well. The boy wore a white porcelain mask and held a long saber, his shoulder soaked in what appeared to be blood.

An assassin? Shen Jue thought.

The assassin's timing couldn't have been worse. Shen Jue had just killed a man, and he couldn't let the imperial guards find him there.

Shen Jue fetched the scissors from his room. He gripped them tightly in both hands as he prepared to stab the assassin. Just as the scissors were about to pierce skin, the other boy's eyes snapped open, flashing with bloodlust. He quickly rolled to his feet, and his right hand clamped down on Shen Jue's wrist like an iron vice. The young assassin's left hand drew a dagger from his waistband. He charged forward and pinned Shen Jue to the ground, pressing the blade to his neck.

In the dim light, their eyes met. The assassin boy froze. "Shaoye?"

Shen Jue was also stunned. He reached up and removed the mask. Sure enough, a familiar face greeted him. Its more mature features had developed a stalwart edge. A few drops of blood—their origins unknown—stained his cheeks, giving his visage a fierce, battle-hardened aura.

Xiahou Lian struggled to his feet, holding the well for support. “You didn’t see me. I’ll be on my way. Maybe we’ll meet again.”

He took three steps toward the outer wall, then collapsed with a thud.

Shen Jue was shocked into silence.

Xiahou Lian was severely injured—the cut on his shoulder was deep enough to expose bone. Shen Jue carried him to Sixi’s room, stripped off his bloodstained clothes, and burned them in the brazier. Fortunately, Shen Jue had some medicinal herbs in his room. He selected the ones meant to staunch blood loss and applied them to Xiahou Lian’s wound.

Xiahou Lian drifted in and out of consciousness. Sweat drenched his forehead, and his brow furrowed in discomfort. When Shen Jue put his hand to the other boy’s forehead, it was burning with fever. He fetched some cold water, then soaked his face towel and placed it over Xiahou Lian’s forehead.

Outside, a commotion erupted.

“Everyone come out here!” someone shouted. “Find the assassin!”

Shen Jue’s heart raced. He cracked the window to see a group of imperial guards, their faces stern and severe, their armor and swords gleaming coldly in the night.

If the guards found Xiahou Lian, both he and Shen Jue would be doomed. He’d panicked upon seeing Xiahou Lian’s injury, and in his haste to bandage it, he hadn’t thought to hide the other boy in the well.

But there was no time for second-guessing. Shen Jue’s mind raced as he tried to think of some way to deceive the guards. Noticing the makeup on Sixi’s bureau, Shen Jue quickly grabbed a chunk of rouge. He hastily dabbed Xiahou Lian’s face with red spots, then wrapped him snugly in the blanket. After ensuring that no blood had stained his own clothes, he slipped quietly out the door.

Consort Gao was shrieking excitedly, “Where is the emperor? Why hasn’t he come? Are you here to take me back? Wonderful! I’m returning! I’m the imperial noble consort—the imperial noble consort!”

Two guards tied Consort Gao to a pillar. The courtyard’s other three consorts were slightly more stable; they cowered under the eaves, peeking

out with fearful eyes at the imposing procession.

“The imperial noble consort was attacked during the banquet. The assassin fled in this direction, so we’re under orders to search the area. Please summon everyone in the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard for inspection,” said one of the guards.

Eunuchs hurried over. They buttoned their robes as they lined up under the eaves, heads bowed.

A guard walked around, patting the right shoulder of everyone present. Finding nothing amiss, he turned to Shen Jue. “Is everyone here?”

“Sir, someone is still lying down inside,” another guard reported.

“That’s Sixi-gonggong,” Shen Jue told him calmly. “He’s ill and can’t get up.”

“Ill or not, we have to check him.” The guard gestured to his subordinate. “Go in and take a look.”

“Sixi-gonggong is covered in red spots,” Shen Jue added. “I’m afraid it could be smallpox. It would be better not to go in there.”

At his words, everyone shrank back in fear.

The main guard’s expression darkened. “We have our orders: Everyone must be inspected. Otherwise, how would we explain ourselves if the assassin happened to be hiding in there? Who here has had smallpox? They’ll come help me search.”

Two guards stepped forward. “We had smallpox as children.”

Shen Jue’s heart sank. “Why take such a risk, sir? Smallpox is no joke. I just came from his room, and I swear on my life, no assassin is hiding in there. On top of that, Sixi-gonggong is the godson of Supervisor Liu of the imperial stables. You should tread carefully.”

With Wei De in power, eunuchs held significant influence in the palace. Even those appointed imperial guards had to show deference to high-ranking eunuchs. Although Shen Jue had been assigned to the cold palace, he was still a minor supervisor, and the guards didn’t dare order him around.

The guards' leader hesitated, but finally said, "We're only carrying out our duties—please don't take offense. Follow me inside, men."

"Please understand, sir," one guard added. "The assassin is elusive—a master of concealment. He could stand right behind you, and you wouldn't even know it. This search is for everyone's safety."

With that, the three guards entered the room. Shen Jue closed his eyes for a moment, then followed them inside.

Xiahou Lian had awoken. Seeing the guards approach, he struggled to sit up. "This humble servant greets the honorable guards."

Noticing the red spots on his face, the guards stepped back subtly.

The two guards who'd had smallpox searched the room, then shook their heads at their leader. He turned to Xiahou Lian, who lay on the bed. The main guard's eyes flickered over him. "One of our blades struck the assassin's shoulder. Could you please remove the blanket and let me see yours?"

Cold sweat drenched Shen Jue's forehead and dripped into his eyes, but he kept his head down so the guards wouldn't see.

What should he do?

If the blanket was pulled away from Xiahou Lian's shoulder, and the guards saw his wound, neither of the boys would live past that day.

Chapter 22:
The Shadows of Flowers and Leaves

IN THE DARK NIGHT, Chenqian Palace was brightly lit.

A woman's piercing cries and groans reverberated through the palace. Beneath swaying lanterns, maids emerged from a chamber carrying golden basins full of blood, while others hurried in with fresh basins. The sheer volume of blood was horrific; its vivid crimson hue seared the eyes. Imperial physicians stood in a huddle outside the door, murmuring in hushed tones, their wrinkles deepening like cracks on tree bark.

For a woman, giving birth was like breaking through the gates of hell, and it was obvious that Imperial Noble Consort Ma wasn't doing well.

Situ Jin stood motionless beneath the eaves. The drizzling rain drifted onto his face, and he blinked.

At twenty years old, he had a striking yet stern face with sharp eyebrows and a high nose that gave him an aloof air. His features, combined with his quiet nature, often led those who didn't know him well to assume that he was unapproachable. In reality, he simply struggled with words, which left him with few friends. When the imperial guards gathered to drink or gamble, they seldom invited him. When they exchanged gossip about palace intrigues, he was never included. Though he had no real interest in such activities, he couldn't help feeling a twinge of loneliness when he was spurned.

After almost three years of service as an imperial guard, he could only carry on a conversation with one fellow from his hometown. He had to admit that he hadn't been very successful socially.

Sometimes, Situ Jin thought that being an imperial guard wasn't merely about protecting the palace—it was also about drinking, boasting, and socializing with the other guards. Despite his punctuality and discipline, he still felt he was falling short.

One of his fellow guards spoke in a low voice, his face full of pity. "Ah, Imperial Noble Consort Ma has truly suffered. She managed to escape

Lady Gao’s schemes but couldn’t dodge the assassin’s blade. The assassin ruined a perfectly fine birthday banquet and so terrified Imperial Noble Consort Ma that she went into early labor!”

Another guard asked, “Who do you think sent the assassin?”

“Do you think it could’ve been Wei-gonggong? Everyone knows that Imperial Noble Consort Ma despises the eunuchs and badmouths them to the emperor when they’re alone together. During the Yellow River flood, she told him that the eunuchs didn’t need to hoard wealth and that he should seize Wei-gonggong’s assets for disaster relief. I heard that Wei-gonggong was privately furious. The very next day, he gave the emperor a troupe of female musicians.”

The rain grew heavier, droplets streaming down Situ Jin’s armor and seeping into his clothes. He adjusted his stance slightly as his light-yellow uniform darkened in uneven patches.

Situ Jin was aware of that incident. The musicians had hailed from Yangzhou and had the delicate charm unique to Southern women. Situ Jin had happened to be on duty in the hall during their performance, and their every glance had oozed allure.

One guard shook his head and sighed. “You really have to admire Imperial Noble Consort Ma. Despite Wei-gonggong’s relentless attempts to curry favor, he couldn’t best her. He never succeeded. But why isn’t the emperor here for Imperial Noble Consort Ma’s labor?”

“The Tatars recently raided the border. They seized quite a few women and a lot of gold and brought them back to the desert. The emperor is at court, discussing that matter with his ministers. I suspect troops will be mobilized any day now to teach the Tatars a lesson.”

A young eunuch rushed over in the rain. He grabbed a physician and demanded, “How is the consort? The emperor has decreed that if anything happens to her or the infant prince, you’ll all be buried with them!”

The physicians trembled in fear and glanced at one another. No one dared to speak the truth.

“Speak up!” shouted the eunuch hoarsely. “The emperor is waiting!”

One elderly physician weighed his words carefully. “Imperial Noble Consort Ma’s constitution has always been naturally cold,” he said, unwilling to be blunt. “Blood and qi flourish in warmth but wither in cold; it leads to stagnation and obstruction. The consort suffers from excessive yin energy. Her hands are cold, her tongue is red, and she’s been struggling to sleep at night. We checked her pulse and found it faint and uneven, so we prescribed tonics to bolster her blood and qi. She was improving, but today’s shock drove a massive influx of yin energy into her body and disrupted the fetal qi. All our previous efforts have been...”

Only at the end of the physician’s speech did the eunuch understand his implication. He stamped in frustration, then glanced at the basins of blood the maids were carrying out. The consort seemed to be losing strength—her moans within were starting to fade. Another physician hastily instructed a maid to brew ginseng soup.

“The emperor is already in his forties,” said the eunuch, “and this prince is only the second he’s fathered. If anything happens to the child, can you bear to take responsibility?”

The child hadn’t even been born yet. How could he be so sure that it was a prince? The physicians shrank back, their expressions grim. The emperor had long struggled to produce heirs and, even in his forties, had only one son. The entire palace knew how much he treasured the child in Imperial Noble Consort Ma’s womb. He’d often patted her belly, boasting that it surely held a prince.

One physician gathered his courage and said, “There is a way to save the prince. The child is full-term. We could perform a caesarean section—” Before he could finish, the elderly physician pinched him. He immediately fell silent.

Situ Jin and the other imperial guards stood nearby, listening to the conversation through the pattering rain. They shuddered.

Several maids walked up the steps with bowed heads, carrying oilcloth-covered bowls of ginseng soup. Situ Jin glanced over and noticed one maid who looked unfamiliar.

Frowning, he stepped forward and stopped her. “Which palace are you from? I’ve never seen you before.”

The maid’s voice was as quiet as the buzz of a mosquito. “I’m new.”

Several more imperial guards approached, asking, “What’s wrong?”

Situ Jin stared at the maid for a moment, then lifted the oilcloth. On the tray beneath it, a dagger lay next to the soup bowl. Everyone froze, shocked. In an instant, the maid suddenly hurled the tray at Situ Jin, who turned his head to dodge it. He quickly followed up with a kick to the maid’s stomach. She let out a grunt, then flipped backward and vanished into the rain, as if she were a swallow.

“Assassin! There’s an assassin!” the guards shouted.

The woman landed and knelt on one knee in the rain. Her hair ornaments scattered to the ground, and a waterfall of black hair tumbled free. She tore her skirt to reveal long, slender legs; the lanterns’ light spilled over them, imparting them with the warm glow of fine jade. A black dagger was strapped to the outside of the woman’s thigh. She slowly drew the blade, its cold gleam slicing through Situ Jin’s vision.

The imperial guards drew their sabers and encircled the assassin. She remained motionless as rainwater streamed down her temples and jaw.

“Surrender! You can’t escape!” someone roared.

The woman laughed darkly. Her makeup was smeared, her smile eerie and sinister. “Escape? Who said I’d do that? The Garuda of Qiye Garden is here to send Imperial Noble Consort Ma on her final journey!”

As she finished speaking, countless black shadows emerged from the flowers and trees, wielding pale, gleaming longswords. They clashed with the imperial guards, breaking through their formation at once. The young eunuch screamed in terror, fleeing on all fours into Chenqian Palace.

At the center of the chaos, the woman shot forward like an arrow, her body like a blade, the light on her saber as cold as the moon. Situ Jin drew his sword and stepped forward, blocking a fatal strike aimed at his companion. Their blades scraped as Situ Jin came face-to-face with the assassin. He could feel her icy gaze and her viperlike, hissing breath.

The woman’s saber was terribly quick. One swing followed another in a relentless flurry of slashes and thrusts that flowed into another overhead strike. Her attacks came on like a storm, relentless and

overwhelming; Situ Jin barely kept up. Time and time again, she forced him into treacherous predicaments. He could hear his own heartbeat pounding like a drum.

Too fast! Too fast! The rapid attacks had to be draining her strength. Situ Jin gritted his teeth and did his best to hold out, waiting for the moment the woman's energy would wane so that he could counterattack.

After a few breaths, her movements faltered slightly. Situ Jin's eyes lit up—this was his chance!

Cold raindrops the size of beans struck his hand and blade sharply, jolting his nerves. Situ Jin roared, slashing through the downpour, sparks flying as his blade clashed against hers. Behind her blade's silver gleam, the woman's eyes glinted as if in a sinister smile.

Situ Jin realized that something was wrong and tried to retreat—but it was too late. A short blade slid from the woman's sleeve and slashed his arm deeply. Blood gushed out.

Looking up, Situ Jin saw that the woman had a wicked, arrogant smile on her lips as she held a long saber in her right hand and a dagger in her left.

The Garuda's dual blades.

Situ Jin tightened his grip on his goose-quill saber. Blood ran down his arm and dripped from his fingers onto the ground.

No one had noticed a sinister figure emerging from the flowers like a monster crawling from its swamp. Raising his head, the figure fired a blow dart through the paper window. Candlelight from inside the palace seeped through the tiny hole the dart had pierced. All at once, Imperial Noble Consort Ma's moans ceased. Then screams erupted from within the palace as maids began to run out in terror, some tripping and tumbling down the stairs.

"The consort is dead! The consort has been assassinated!"

The imperial guards were horrified.

As if on cue, the assassins retreated, scaling walls and scattering in every direction like a receding tide. At the same moment, reinforcements arrived, firing crossbow bolts at the fleeing figures. The Garuda's attacks

intensified. Each strike was thunderous, her blade unyielding, impenetrable. Situ Jin couldn’t hold his ground.

The semblance of a stalemate earlier had been an illusion. Situ Jin was no match for her at all—she’d merely been distracting him.

He’d now been struck several times, but the woman had stopped slashing away at him. Cutting down a few of those who blocked her path, she scaled a locust tree and reached the palace roof. The soldiers’ crossbow bolts flew after her, but she weaved and swerved like she had eyes on the back of her head. Every bolt missed, and in an instant, the woman was gone.

“Perform the caesarean! Perform a caesarean! We can still save the prince!”

A physician who’d tumbled down in the walkway suddenly came to his senses, scrambled to his feet, and dragged the elderly physician into the consort’s chamber. When they lifted the curtain, they saw Imperial Noble Consort Ma’s lifeless body on a blood-soaked bed. A thin blow dart was lodged in her belly. Black veins spread like crawling insects from the site of the dart, covering half her skin.

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IN THE PATTERING RAIN, Shen Jue awoke from a dream. Xiahou Lian slept restlessly, constantly shifting. Shen Jue, a light sleeper, had woken up many times that night.

He touched Xiahou Lian’s arm and found it so scalding hot that his hand jerked back reflexively. Sitting up, he placed his hand on Xiahou Lian’s forehead; it was clammy, covered in cold sweat.

“Xiahou Lian!” Shen Jue shook him gently.

Xiahou Lian groggily opened his eyes. “I feel awful,” he said, his voice feeble.

Shen Jue dipped a cloth in water and placed it on Xiahou Lian’s forehead. “I’ll go to the imperial physicians’ office and get you some

medicine. Stay here and don’t move.”

Xiahou Lian nodded weakly and closed his eyes.

Shen Jue threw on his clothes and ran outside. The night was as dark as ink, and the palace loomed ahead like a deeper shadow in the darkness. The long street stretched into the night. Shen Jue could hear the crisp patter of his own footsteps, but for some reason, no one else was around—not a single guard was visible. Rather than easing Shen Jue’s mind, the quiet only instilled a crushing dread.

When he reached the imperial physicians’ office, the door was wide open, medicinal herbs strewn across the ground. There was no sign of any maids, eunuchs, or physicians. Shen Jue couldn’t guess what had happened. Repressing his unease, he rummaged quickly through the cabinets for some golden wound medicine and antipyretic herbs. He stuffed what he found into his robe and was preparing to leave when hurried footsteps echoed from outside.

Several assassins rushed past, all clad in black. Startled, Shen Jue quickly ducked behind the door. The assassins’ faint, hoarse voices reached his ears.

“Shouldn’t we look for Xiahou Lian, Boss?”

“Why bother? That brat couldn’t even find the old palace map. Just getting out of here safely will be a miracle. We have our own problems to deal with; we don’t have time to worry about him too. We’ve fulfilled our mission: The consort is dead. As for Xiahou Lian, leave him to fend for himself.”

The assassins were from Qiye Garden. Of course, Xiahou Lian couldn’t have found that old map—Shen Jue had memorized and then burned it. Now only he knew the palace’s secrets. The assassins were probably aware that there was a secret passage into the palace, but unsure of its exact location—hence their need for the map.

So Xiahou Lian’s role had been to find that map, not to assassinate anyone.

Once the assassins were gone, Shen Jue emerged from behind the door and quickly fled the imperial physicians’ office. Just as he rounded the

corner, a clatter of iron boots and shouts of “Catch the assassins!” passed behind him.

Finally, Shen Jue reached the rear garden. The shadows of intertwined trees melded and loomed, as if every dark corner hid untold dangers. Shen Jue sprinted down the path, desperate to return to Xiahou Lian’s side.

Suddenly, rapid footsteps approached. Shen Jue’s heart skipped a beat, and he ducked behind a tree.

“Who’s there?!” Situ Jin shouted sharply.

Shen Jue’s entire body tensed, and he clenched his fists hard.

“Come out!”

Situ Jin raised his torch, slowly walking farther along the path. Leaves the size of bowls brushed his face. His surroundings were eerily quiet but for the clinking of chain mail as the imperial guards moved.

“Are you sure you saw something, Situ?” someone whispered. The flower bushes were too dark at night, and wet moss made the ground slippery. The imperial guards’ hearts raced uncontrollably.

The guards’ torches burned brightly, carving small pockets of light from the darkness. The guards moved cautiously through the flower beds, standing back-to-back, blades gripped tightly in their hands. Assassins were masters of stealth and surprise attacks. By watching each other’s backs, the guards left them no opportunity to strike.

The attackers were terrifyingly skilled. The guards had lost twelve men in Chenqian Palace but had themselves killed only three assassins and captured one. The captured assassin had slit his own throat; his blood had gushed forth and pooled under Situ Jin’s boots. When Situ Jin picked up the assassin’s saber, he’d seen the characters of *Tianxiabai* carved in seal script: *Under heaven, all is white.*[15]

Ironic that a blade named *that* would be wielded by an assassin lurking in the shadows.

As the bright torchlight drew closer, Shen Jue frowned deeply. He was about to step forward and reveal himself when suddenly he heard the whistle of a crossbow bolt. An imperial guard screamed and fell to the

ground, and a shadow leaped down from a tree three steps from Shen Jue to land beside two imperial guards. Before those guards could turn, dual blades slit their throats.

In an instant, three lives were lost.

The Garuda tossed aside her short sabers and lifted a goose-quill saber from the ground. She clamped the blade under her arm and drew it slowly, wiping the bloodstains away to reveal the saber's gleaming surface. Splattered with blood and still dressed in a tattered palace uniform, she raised her head in the darkness, her pretty yet murderous eyes coming into view.

The surviving two guards scrambled backward, petrified.

"Did you happen to see a boy, about this tall?" The Garuda asked, holding her hand at around chest height and cocking her head. "He's dressed in black like the others."

The imperial guards shook their heads mutely.

"Oh. That's a shame." The Garuda smiled and raised her blade to strike.

Situ Jin pushed past the other guards to intercept the Garuda's blade, but in the next instant, she dropped to one knee and slipped her long saber past his. Simultaneously, a hidden blade shot from her left sleeve and pierced the throat of an imperial guard behind him. Situ Jin tried to turn to save his other comrades, but he was no match for the Garuda's speed. She moved like a phantom, soaring toward the imperial guards. With a long upward slice, her saber left a crimson line across another guard's neck and cheek.

The smell of blood spread through the flower bushes. The Garuda plunged her blade into the guard's body, and his blood splattered over her face. The man on the ground fell silent.

Despair filled Situ Jin. The gulf between them was too vast; he stood no chance. Tightening his grip on his sword, he slowly exhaled, gaze locked on the woman before him. She stood beneath the flowering vines, her figure shrouded in shadow. Only the goose-quill saber she held gleamed coldly, its tip dripping with fresh crimson blood.

“Hey…I’m in a hurry,” she drawled languidly. “Can we call it quits?”

Situ Jin couldn’t guess what kind of game she was playing. “I must fulfill my duty,” he said coldly. “One of us must perish here.”

“How boring—” she muttered.

She’d yet to finish her words when Situ suddenly struck. *When strength isn’t enough, one must rely on cunning!*

In a flash, he’d bent his knees as if drawing a bow, then sprung forward like an arrow, charging at the Garuda with the force of a gale or thunderclap. He held his breath, the roar of the wind filling his ears, as he watched the woman lift her strikingly beautiful face. Beneath her bangs, her brows and eyes were as dark as ink.

Clang!

The Garuda swung her saber in a crescent arc, blocking Situ Jin’s full-force strike. Rather than meeting his blade head-on, she’d sidestepped at the moment of impact. Her long blade slid along his, the screech of metal on metal piercing the air. As Situ Jin exhaled, he felt the cold blade slice through his armor and into the muscles between his ribs. Warm blood spurted out, soaking his armor.

“You haven’t yet perfected your Blizzard Saber technique,” she told him. “What’s the use of being dutiful without sufficient skill? You should value your life more, young man. Another heir to the Blizzard Saber lost. What a pity.”

The Garuda slung her saber over her shoulder, leaving Situ Jin to gaze at her back as she walked away, carefree. Situ Jin knelt on the ground, leaning on his saber. Tentatively, he touched his side. His hand came away warm and wet with blood.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the trees—a frail-looking young eunuch in green robes. Situ Jin struggled to lift his head and catch a glimpse of the eunuch’s pale face.

“Don’t be afraid. She probably won’t come back,” Situ Jin said softly. “You’re Shen-gonggong from the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard, aren’t you? I recognize you. I used to serve there.”

Leaves and flowers cast Shen Jue’s face in shadow. “You knew I was hiding here?”

“I noticed from the beginning, but I didn’t want to expose you,” Situ Jin replied, his gaze falling on the bundle of medicine in Shen Jue’s arms. “You’re stealing medicine? No wonder you’re out so late.”

“My roommate is sick. We’re just lowly servants and can’t summon a physician. We ran out of medicine, so I had no choice but to resort to this.”

“Your roommate must be very brotherly to you,” Situ Jin murmured, his eyelids growing heavier, his voice faint. “That’s nice. All my brothers are dead.” He looked at the corpses scattered on the ground. Their blood soaked into the dark-brown earth, dyeing it a deep crimson. Though they might not have considered *him* family, he’d always believed that those who fought side by side and faced life and death together were brothers.

Dew from the flowering vines dripped onto his cheek, cold and penetrating, as if seeping into his heart. *Spring in the capital is so cold*, he thought hazily. His grip on the saber was slipping.

Shen Jue’s eyes were calm and somber as he said softly, “Yes. In the whole wide world, he’s the one who cares most for me.”

“Then go back quickly. The Fourth Qianxi Courtyard isn’t far. Avoid the shadows and stick to the light. The shadows hold assassins...and the Garuda.”

Situ Jin couldn’t hold on any longer. His hand dropped from his saber, and he fell face-first to the ground. His face was half-buried in the dirt, his body covered in bloodstains and grime.

Shen Jue was taken aback. Stepping closer, he asked, “What did you say? The Garuda? Was that woman just now the Garuda?”

But Situ Jin could no longer answer.

Shen Jue frowned. After a moment’s silence, he turned and left.

Shen Jue returned to his room to find Xiahou Lian still unconscious. He put his hand to Xiahou Lian’s forehead—it didn’t feel any hotter. Then he removed the other boy’s clothing and applied the golden wound medicine from the imperial physicians’ office. That would be far better than the crude herbs he’d used earlier. Sprinkled over Xiahou Lian’s swollen wounds, the fine powder cooled his flesh, alleviating the prickling heat. Xiahou Lian’s breathing eased slightly.

After brewing more medicine and feeding it to Xiahou Lian, Shen Jue waited an hour, then checked his temperature again. The fever had subsided. Heaving a sigh of relief, Shen Jue pushed open the window. Night was giving way to dawn, painting the vast, towering skies deep blue.

Palaces stretched out one after another, seeming to reach all the way to the morning light on the horizon.

Xiahou Lian awoke. Squinting sleepily, he sat up, his messy hair a tangled pile of straw.

Shen Jue carried over a basin of water and handed him a damp cloth. Xiahou Lian closed his eyes and wiped his face haphazardly. The charcoal had burned out, so Shen Jue fetched more, using tongs to place each piece in the brazier.

“Xiahou Lian.” Shen Jue suddenly spoke up. “I saw the Ga—”

“Saw the what?” Xiahou Lian interrupted, still half-asleep. He shook his head vigorously.

Shen Jue paused as he replaced the charcoal, eyes downcast.

The poorer a person had been before securing wealth, the more they dreaded poverty. Shen Jue remembered sweeping snow alone in the bitter cold during his first year in the palace. Later, he’d finally secured a position in the Duanning Palace, only for a concubine to slap him hard for delivering a meal a moment late. Then there was Sixi, whom Shen Jue had killed himself. The memory of Sixi’s greasy hand touching him still turned his stomach.

The palace was like an endless sea with no shore in sight. Though the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard was peaceful, it wasn’t a place where one could rise above their station. In general, the maids and eunuchs below Shen Jue spent most of their days resting in bed, waiting for the day they would breathe their last breath and a thin coffin lid would seal their fate.

Shen Jue couldn’t waste his life here—he had to find a way out. But the Forbidden City was a prison he would never escape. Finally, though, he’d found someone to drift in this sea with him. That was like a first taste of sugar after a lifetime of bitterness. How could he let Xiahou Lian go?

His eyes darkened. In the end, he shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

Chapter 21:
The Candle's Flickering Shadows

THE CANDLE'S FLAME crackled softly, and the charcoal fire on the ground hissed and smoldered. Shen Jue's fingertips had turned pale, his mind a storm of tangled thoughts.

Meanwhile, Xiahou Lian remained calm and composed. "As you command," he said in a low voice.

Four pairs of eyes were fixed on him. Beneath those intense gazes, Xiahou Lian pulled the blanket down, revealing a smooth right shoulder. No scar marred it. The skin was a little bumpy, but the guards stood at a distance. With only dim candlelight to judge by, none noticed anything unusual.

His suspicions dispelled, the guard told Shen Jue, "We insisted on the inspection only to ensure that the assassin wasn't hiding here. Please don't take offense. Rest well, both of you. We'll take our leave."

Shen Jue escorted them out of the courtyard, then finally let out a long sigh of relief. He had no idea how Xiahou Lian could've hidden such a severe injury. Rushing back into the room, he found Xiahou Lian shivering, his shoulder already drenched in fresh blood. To Shen Jue's shock, Xiahou Lian appeared to be slowly peeling a layer of skin from his shoulder. His actions tore the wound wider, and blood gushed out as if from a spring.

"What are you doing?!" Shen Jue cried in alarm, running over. On closer inspection, he realized that the "skin" was some sort of prosthetic. Xiahou Lian had used it to deceive the guards.

"Help me peel it off," Xiahou Lian said through gritted teeth, his face drenched in sweat. He felt as if half his body was about to give out.

Shen Jue took over. "I'll tear it off in one go. Brace yourself."

Xiahou Lian stuffed a piece of cloth into his mouth, closed his eyes, and nodded.

Shen Jue pressed down on Xiahou Lian's flesh, then—with a forceful tug—ripped the prosthetic off. Xiahou Lian spasmed violently in agony, nearly passing out.

Struggling to remain conscious, he said weakly, "Get a needle. I need you to stitch up the wound."

"I'm not a doctor!" Shen Jue said through clenched teeth. "I've never stitched a wound before. And I don't have any catgut. If I do it wrong, it could kill you!"

"There's no other way, Shaoye. If you don't stitch it, I'll die anyway. Think of it like mending clothes. You've mended clothes before, haven't you?"

"Xiahou Lian!"

"I trust you," Xiahou Lian said, his gaze firm. "Just do it."

Xiahou Lian had always been like this—he trusted spontaneously and always acted without considering the consequences. Life and death were never part of his calculations—not back when they barged into Wangqing Pavilion, nor the night of the Xie family massacre, and not now either.

How could he be so indifferent to life and death? Had he never felt afraid?

Shen Jue looked at him, his gaze dark. "All right," he finally said.

He fetched a needle and thread, holding the needle in a candle's flame to sterilize it. Then he cleaned Xiahou Lian's wound. With the needle pressed to the gaping gash, he said, "I'm starting."

Xiahou Lian stuffed the cloth back into his mouth and nodded.

Xiahou Lian's back was to Shen Jue's face. Crisscrossed whip scars stretched across his skin like grotesque centipedes. The sight was horrifying.

When had Xiahou Lian become an assassin? And how many times had he come face-to-face with death?

Shen Jue steadied himself and pierced Xiahou Lian's flesh with the needle, making him shudder. "Don't move," said Shen Jue sternly.

The charcoal fire crackled. The room was stiflingly hot—both Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian were drenched in sweat. Xiahou Lian's fingers dug into the bedframe, clawing deep marks into the wood. Gripped with agony, he lost all feeling in his shoulder, and his vision went hazy; his surroundings distorted as if shimmering in a heat wave. His senses became sluggish, and sounds seemed to drift in from afar, muffled and indistinct. Insects' faint chirping, the guards' armor clinking—every noise seemed to come from someplace thousands of palaces away.

His mind drifted far away. He recalled lying on a narrow bed in a mountain hut two years prior, his back covered with wounds, listening to the pine trees rustle in the wind. The temple bells had tolled day after day, their echoes seeming to summon spirits from afar. He remembered his mother guiding him into the temple. There, the Shixin Buddha had stood on the steps. He'd placed the long, pitch-black saber known as Jingtie into Xiahou Lian's hands. Suddenly, he was overcome by fatigue.

Shen Jue made the final stitch and tied it off. He wiped the blood from Xiahou Lian's skin, applied some medicinal herbs, then bandaged his shoulder. Only after finishing that did Shen Jue have a chance to wipe the sweat from his own face. "It's done."

Xiahou Lian was completely drained. Sprawled on the bed, he breathed weakly but managed a strained smile. "See, Shaoye? I knew you could do it."

"Don't celebrate too soon. If the wound gets infected, it'll still kill you," Shen Jue said, tossing the cloth into the basin. The water inside was now deep red, as if the basin were full of blood instead.

Xiahou Lian caught his breath and struggled to put on his clothes. "I need to go. But someday I'll repay you for saving my life."

Shen Jue pushed him back onto the bed, frowning. "Where do you think you're heading in this state? Stay here and rest."

"If the eunuch who lives in this room comes back, we'll both be caught. I can't drag you into this."

Shen Jue raised an eyebrow. "How do you know this isn't my room?"

"Your room wouldn't smell this bad," Xiahou Lian said with a weak laugh.

“Well, don’t worry. He’s not coming back,” Shen Jue said coldly, tucking the blanket around Xiahou Lian. “Get some rest. I’ll fetch you medicine.”

Xiahou Lian could tell that something bad had happened but didn’t press further. Instead he asked, “Is there a portrait of him? Can you give me a copy?”

“What for?”

Xiahou Lian smiled mysteriously. “Have you heard of the Kinnara of Qiye Garden?”

Shen Jue shook his head.

“He’s my shifu and a master of disguise,” Xiahou Lian explained. “I’ve learned about eighty percent of his techniques. If you give me this eunuch’s portrait, I can make a mask. No one will be able to tell the difference unless they get up close.”

The Garden housed many secret techniques—Shen Jue had heard that himself. After agreeing to draw Sixi’s portrait, he went to the kitchen to prepare Xiahou Lian’s medicine.

A bit later, Shen Jue brought him the medicine. Xiahou Lian drank it in one gulp, seemingly unfazed by the bitterness. Unbeknownst to Shen Jue, Xiahou Lian had spent two years steeped in bloodshed, forging an extraordinary tolerance for pain and suffering. He’d undergone the stitches earlier without any anesthetic—such a procedure would’ve caused most people to faint.

After cleaning up the mess in the room, Shen Jue was drenched in sweat. His earlier bath had been rendered pointless by now. Xiahou Lian lay quietly on the bed, observing him. His calm face exuded a peace and poise that hadn’t been there before.

The two boys sat in silence. The iron wind chimes beneath the eaves swayed in the breeze, tinkling.

Staring at the flickering candle flame, Shen Jue suddenly asked, “Xiahou Lian, aren’t you afraid of death?”

Xiahou Lian was taken aback. “Of course I am—terrified. Each time I go on a mission, I’m on edge, afraid that every moment might be my last.”

“Then why did you save me that night? The scars on your back...” Shen Jue’s mind was sharp; he’d already guessed that he was the reason for the scars on Xiahou Lian’s back.

“It was just a few lashes—I survived,” Xiahou Lian said with a nonchalant smile. “But why’d *you* save *me*, Shaoye? You could’ve ignored me or handed me over to the guards.”

Shen Jue turned his face away. “You saved my life. It was only right that I save yours.”

Xiahou Lian sighed deeply, staring at the ceiling. “Fate never gives us many choices. Either spend my life as a prisoner in the mountains or become an assassin flirting with life and death. Either watch you die at the hands of Qiye Garden assassins or take a few lashes and hope to make it out alive. I didn’t want to be a prisoner—and I didn’t want you to die, so I chose the lashing.” He grinned slyly. “Luckily, I’ve made it out alive every time.”

“Your luck won’t last forever,” Shen Jue said quietly. “What about your mother? Doesn’t she care what happens to you?”

Xiahou Lian’s eyes flashed. He managed a bitter smile. “I’m already fourteen. A man must stand tall on his own. How could I keep hiding in my mother’s arms like a child?”

Outside of murder, Xiahou Pei—his mother—was totally unreliable. Most of the time, she barely acknowledged her son, leaving him to grow like an untamed weed. After returning from the Western Regions and rescuing Xiahou Lian, she’d vanished again. Left to his own devices, Xiahou Lian had healed his wounds on his own and picked up the art of assassination from others. He would have been lying if he’d said that he didn’t resent her. Taking a few deep breaths, Xiahou Lian forced back the moisture in his eyes.

A real man wouldn’t cry.

Noticing how dark it was outside, Shen Jue said, “It’s late, and I have duties tomorrow. I should head back to my room.”

“Can I sleep in your room, Shaoye? This place reeks,” Xiahou Lian said, grabbing Shen Jue’s sleeve with a tormented expression.

“I can’t let you.”

“But look at me! What if the smell winds up suffocating me? Or my stitches burst, and I bleed to death?”

“I think you’ll live to be a thousand-year-old scourge,” Shen Jue sneered.

Xiahou Lian struggled to sit up. “Have some mercy!”

“Fine,” Shen Jue sighed. “Stop moving. I’ll help you.”

Shen Jue assisted Xiahou Lian to his room and onto the heated bed, then headed to the bathhouse to wash once more. Xiahou Lian curled up in Shen Jue’s blankets and breathed in his scent, clean and pleasant. It was a vast improvement on the suffocating stench of the other room, which had almost knocked him out. That, coupled with the unbearable agony in his shoulder, had been practically the ultimate torture.

Shen Jue’s sparsely decorated room contained only a few simple pieces of furniture and a lone bed. It was so austere that it almost felt icy. For his part, Xiahou Lian was better suited to a livelier environment. His room always brimmed with plants; their brilliant colors served to lift his spirits. Shen Jue, however, favored simplicity; he lived like an ascetic, tending toward the cold and bare.

Shen Jue had found the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard quite to his liking. Its greatest—although perhaps only—advantage was that it didn’t require Shen Jue to share a crowded dormitory, like eunuchs elsewhere in the palace did. This courtyard was quiet and underpopulated, with more rooms than occupants.

Shen Jue returned from his bath with his hair loose. The dark strands gleamed against his white underrobe like ink on paper, and Shen Jue’s porcelain face appeared even paler in contrast.

Xiahou Lian scooted aside in the bed, and Shen Jue climbed under the blankets next to him.

Xiahou Lian looked at him. Shen Jue’s long eyelashes fluttered gently, like a butterfly’s delicate wings.

“What do you want to ask?” Shen Jue said softly. “Go ahead. You’re about to bore holes into my face, staring like that.”

Caught off guard, Xiahou Lian awkwardly burrowed deeper beneath the blankets. “How did you end up in the palace, Shaoye?” he mumbled.

Shen Jue opened his mouth but hesitated as something occurred to him: If Xiahou Lian could disguise himself as Sixi, why couldn’t he remain in the palace *living* as Sixi? That way, he could escape Qiye Garden and stay by Shen Jue’s side, ensuring that they would never be parted again.

The idea took root in his heart, choking it like a vine and making it flutter in his chest. After a moment of silence, Shen Jue said, “I ended up wandering the streets. A pawnshop owner stole the earrings you gave me; I lost my dagger there too. When I had no money, an old beggar took me in and fed me. There was a famine in Shandong that year, and we followed refugees to the capital, hoping to find food. But...”

“What happened?” Xiahou Lian asked.

“The old beggar sold me to the palace,” Shen Jue continued. “Maybe he’d planned to do that all along.”

Xiahou Lian’s eyes widened. “What...?”

Shen Jue spoke with indifference, as if recounting someone else’s story. The more placid he was, the more it pained Xiahou Lian. This boy had spent his life sheltered within the manor. Could he possibly have understood the dangers of the outside world? He would’ve innocently followed anyone who’d offered him candy, oblivious to their hidden intentions. He’d likely seen the elderly beggar as kindhearted and let his guard down. He hadn’t realized that the wicked eventually grew old too—for instance, the Shixin Buddha.

Xiahou Lian sighed, unsure what to say.

“Don’t call me Shaoye anymore,” Shen Jue said, looking down at his fingers. “I’m no longer a young master of the Xie family. Now, I’m just a eunuch, and my name is Shen Jue, not Xie Jinglan. If I kept the Xie family name, then I’m sure my ancestors would be ashamed to see me as a eunuch in the afterlife.”

“The Xie family treated you abominably. Who cares about their opinions?” Xiahou Lian said bitterly. “Whether you’re Xie Jinglan or Shen Jue, you’ll always be my shaoye.”

“By the way, aren’t you curious about what happened to Sixi?” Shen Jue looked up at Xiahou Lian, a cold smile on his lips. “He tried to defile me. He was like a toad lusting after a swan, pursuing something beyond his capabilities. He expected me to submit, but I killed him instead. He’s lying in the dry well outside.”

“What?!” Xiahou Lian was shocked. He knew the palace was a cesspool of rampant same-sex exploitation, but he hadn’t expected Shen Jue to face such depravity. Then again, Shen Jue’s beauty was bound to attract unwanted attention.

Shen Jue’s cold expression in the dim light gave Xiahou Lian the sense that something about him had changed. The hardships in his life, and the filth of the palace, had transformed him. Gloom hung heavy in his eyes, like a shadow, impossible to shake. Xiahou Lian touched Shen Jue’s fingers. “It’s been hard for you, Shaoye.”

“Yes, A-Lian.” Shen Jue’s eyes darkened, becoming deep and unfathomable as an ancient well. He leaned close to Xiahou Lian’s ear and murmured, “Stay here and protect me, okay?”

“I...” Xiahou Lian hesitated.

Shen Jue’s voice held an unyielding determination. “I saved your life. It belongs to me now.”

Chapter 23:
Moonlit Frost

IN THE EVENING, Shen Jue returned from a trip outside. It was the tail end of early spring, and a lingering chill clung to him as he stepped in, his expression sharp and cold. He glanced over and saw Xiahou Lian lounging on the bed, flipping through a saber manual. Hearing him enter, Xiahou Lian looked up. His face nearly stopped Shen Jue in his tracks.

Xiahou Lian had already disguised himself as Sixi; at first glance, Shen Jue almost thought that Sixi had come back to life. Sixi's face was cruel, with eyes as narrow as slits and pale cheeks stretched over high cheekbones. Just looking at him filled one with antipathy. Xiahou Lian's disguise was incredibly true to life, though it lacked the original Sixi's lecherous air. Shen Jue reached out and touched his cheekbone. It was soft and oily, as if made of some kind of wax. He pressed harder, his fingertip leaving an imprint on Xiahou Lian's cheek.

Xiahou Lian tilted his head to avoid Shen Jue's touch. "Stop poking at it," he said, exasperated. "If you ruin it, I'll have to make a new one."

Shen Jue pulled up a stool to sit beside Xiahou Lian and check his wounds. They were healing well—no signs of infection or fresh bleeding. It seemed the King of Hell wasn't ready to claim the troublemaker yet.

After straightening his sleeves, Shen Jue asked casually, "Are you working for Wei De, Xiahou Lian? Is Wei De the boss you once mentioned?"

"What? I've never met Wei De. But the abbot—our boss—well, I know exactly what kind of guy he is. He definitely doesn't look like a eunuch."

"Oh? And what should a eunuch look like?" Shen Jue raised his eyes. "Do I look like a eunuch?"

There was gloom deep in Shen Jue's gaze. He'd always been sensitive, and Xiahou Lian realized immediately that he'd said the wrong thing. He wasn't sure what answer Shen Jue wanted. Saying that he looked

like a eunuch would be akin to stabbing him in the heart, but saying he didn’t... Well, he really *was* one.

As Xiahou Lian hesitated, Shen Jue suddenly decided further discussion would be pointless and changed the subject. “Maybe your boss and Wei De have formed some alliance.”

Xiahou Lian shook his head. “That’s not likely. Qiye Garden has been around for centuries. How old is Wei De? How long can he last? Grievances and blood debts abound in the jianghu, and just a few jobs from there will support the whole mountain. Qiye Garden doesn’t need to endure fire and water for him. As for an alliance, that isn’t likely either. The Garden’s concern has always been money. Besides, the most important thing in my line of work is to stay hidden. We assassins are strictly forbidden from forming connections with people outside the mountain. Someone could follow an assassin’s trail otherwise, or set a trap. It’d just bring unnecessary trouble.”

Hearing that, Shen Jue was a bit displeased. After all, according to that logic, wasn’t *he* Xiahou Lian’s weakness? “I’m not that stupid. As long as you behave, I won’t let anyone find a trace of you, let alone follow your trail.”

As he spoke, he noticed Xiahou Lian’s lips were dry, so he poured a cup of tea and handed it to the other boy. Only after doing so did he realize that he was becoming more and more adept at serving Xiahou Lian. Taking the cup back quickly, he pretended to take a sip himself.

Xiahou Lian assumed that Shen Jue had simply wanted him to hold the tea, so he waited obediently for Shen Jue to finish drinking before taking the cup again. From Shen Jue’s tone, it seemed as though he still didn’t intend to let Xiahou Lian go. Well, that was fine. He needed to stay long enough to recover from his injuries anyway. He could bring it up again later.

“By the way, why did you suddenly ask whether the Garden was serving Wei De? Did you hear something about us?”

Shen Jue glanced at him. “Last night, Imperial Noble Consort Ma was assassinated. Her child was not yet born, and both she and the baby died in Chenqian Palace. You didn’t know?”

Xiahou Lian shook his head like a rattle drum.

“Imperial Noble Consort Ma often criticized Wei De,” Shen Jue continued. “She tried to sway the emperor in private, urging him to distance himself from the eunuch. Wei De tried everything to win back the emperor’s favor, but Imperial Noble Consort Ma was pregnant—and in the palace, those with child by the emperor have all the power. Especially since he has so few heirs. Even Wei De found himself powerless.”

“So the target was Imperial Noble Consort Ma. Two lives lost—what a damn tragedy,” Xiahou Lian sighed. “We’re told not to ask questions, just to kill without compunctions. My mission was only to find an old palace map in the library. I didn’t know they were going to assassinate Imperial Noble Consort Ma.”

Shen Jue’s expression was complicated. “When I went to steal medicine for you, I overheard some assassins talking outside the imperial physicians’ office. They didn’t sound like they cared whether you lived or died.” Shen Jue’s brow creased. Xiahou Lian’s mission hadn’t been as difficult as assassinating Imperial Noble Consort Ma; still, it had required him to infiltrate the palace. Why hadn’t the other assassins provided him any support?

Did the so-called Garden really care about Xiahou Lian’s survival?

Xiahou Lian smiled bitterly. “That’s just how it is. I’m used to it. I’m not that skilled with a saber, and I mess up a lot on missions. I’m used to people looking down on me. In Qiye Garden, the only thing that matters is the sharpness of your blade. If you can’t win against the others, you keep your head down like a quail. If my mother weren’t the sharpest blade of all, I’d already have been bullied to death.” Partway through his explanation, Xiahou Lian suddenly realized something. His expression shifted. “Wait—you said ‘*some* assassins.’ Was more than one involved in Imperial Noble Consort Ma’s death?”

“Yes. Four died in Chenqian Palace, and others escaped.” Shen Jue pictured the Garuda but still kept her presence to himself. He knew exactly what kind of person he was: He was selfish to the core. If it took lying or manipulation to keep Xiahou Lian at his side, Shen Jue wouldn’t bat an eye.

Xiahou Lian was stunned. Four assassins’ deaths would be an unimaginable blow to Qiye Garden. They took in orphans from all over,

raising them in the village. Each child started learning horse stances at five, practicing with a wooden blade at seven, and then with a real saber at ten. Training each assassin took at least seven years, and they rarely lived past twenty-eight.

On top of that, two-thirds of those children chose to stay in the mountains and live as farmers. Even though new children were brought in to replenish the assassins' ranks, most fell within two years. The most dangerous times for an assassin were their early and late years. They were either too young and inexperienced, perishing from carelessness, or too worn down, their body so broken from years of accumulated injuries that they lost all will to live.

That was why Qiye Garden assassins stuck closely to their plans. They would only strike once, and if they missed, they retreated immediately. Large-scale operations were few and far between, and undercover agents were only sent as support and backup. But both the Xie family massacre and the recent assassination in the palace were instances in which the Garden had undertaken a rare large-scale operation.

The abbot, that bald old ass—could he really have sold out Qiye Garden to Wei De for money in his twilight years?

Assassins came and went like shadows, but they could still gloat about their deeds. A typical boast might go: "We kill men within ten paces, then leave no trace for a thousand miles. Once our work is finished, we dust off our clothes and depart. None know our names nor what we've done!" But to become a eunuch's lackey? That would simply be too disgusting. What could such an assassin boast about? Having a master with no member? Xiahou Lian grimaced.

Shen Jue watched as he became lost in thought. "What are you thinking about?" he asked. "Tell me."

Before Xiahou Lian could answer, the patter of footsteps came from beneath the window. "Shen-gonggong, the imperial guards are outside asking to speak with you."

Xiahou Lian exchanged a glance with Shen Jue, then grabbed his sleeve, but Shen Jue patted his hand. "No need to panic." He stood, put on his hat, straightened his clothes, and walked out.

An imperial guard with thick brows and striking eyes stood at the palace gate. Seeing Shen Jue, he bowed, then handed the boy a few packages of medicine. “This humble officer hails from the same town as Situ. He asked that I deliver these to you.”

“Situ?” Shen Jue asked, puzzled.

“You don’t know Captain Situ?” Surprised, the guard scratched his head. “He’s the guard who killed several assassins last night. His side was wounded while he chased after the best assassin—a woman.”

So that was him. Shen Jue’s heart remained calm, unmoved. He had encountered both kind hearts and blackened souls in the palace—though kind hearts were rarer, as they often met tragic fates.

Lowering his eyes, Shen Jue adopted his usual humble demeanor. “This servant is dull-witted. I didn’t realize that was Captain Situ. Please convey my gratitude for his kindness to him.”

Having navigated the palace for two years, Shen Jue had polished his already gentle, respectful demeanor with an additional veneer of humility. Thanks to his harmless, well-mannered facade, he’d already risen to become a minor supervisor, rather than serving tea and washing powerful eunuchs’ feet or chamber pots like the rest of his cohort.

Effortlessly maintaining his approachable yet distant smile, Shen Jue waited for the imperial guard to finish his polite but meaningless chatter so that he could resume his rest.

Instead, the imperial guard dropped his eyes. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to convey your thanks.”

Shen Jue’s smile stiffened slightly. “What do you mean, sir?”

“Wei-gonggong wanted to know how Situ survived, since everyone else died. He claimed that Situ must’ve been cowardly and held back, refusing to give his all. They might’ve caned him if Situ hadn’t been injured so badly. Now, orders from above have arrived: Situ’s been demoted to a suburban camp.” The guard sighed deeply, very nearly cursing Wei De as a “damn eunuch” before abruptly remembering that Shen Jue was one as well and quickly clamming up.

Shen Jue was silent for a moment, then said warmly, “Don’t worry, sir. Captain Situ is highly skilled. The suburban camp won’t be able to bury his talent.”

“That’s true. Life there won’t be easy for him, though. Ah, well, it’s partly Situ’s own fault for being too honest. He doesn’t have many friends, and he never sends gifts to powerful eunuchs to curry favor… But, uh, don’t misunderstand, Shen-gonggong. I don’t mean that you aren’t powerful.” The imperial guard cursed his own loose tongue, forcing a smile.

“You worry too much, sir. I understand. Captain Situ is a good man. And though I may not have much power, I do know a few people. Perhaps I can put in a good word and get him a better position in the camp,” said Shen Jue. It would be easy enough to do. Whether it would work was uncertain, but Shen Jue didn’t mind purchasing Situ some goodwill.

The guard’s eyes lit up, and he smiled. “That’s wonderful! Situ’s lucky to have a friend like you. I need to return to my duties now, so I’ll take my leave. No need to see me out!”

Shen Jue returned to the room to find Xiahou Lian seated in front of the mirror, fixing his disguise. “Xiahou Lian,” he asked casually, “do you think good people are rewarded for that goodness?”

Xiahou Lian looked up at the ceiling and thought for a moment. “Yes. They at least get a better reincarnation in the next life.”

“Is that so?” Shen Jue set down the medicine and smiled to himself. “I suppose I’m shortsighted; I only care about this life.”

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SITU JIN walked slowly, pressing his left hand to the wound on his side and his right against the wall to support himself.

The sun was setting, and the fiery clouds dyed his face red. His long shadow dragged on the ground, his silhouette hunched. The street vendors

were packing up for the day. They pushed their carts along the cobblestone road, their items clattering noisily.

Situ Jin had been demoted—from captain of the imperial guard's right division to captain of some suburban camp. His rank hadn't changed, but he'd lost the privilege of being in the emperor's sphere. Others might have thought that a great loss, but in truth, Situ Jin didn't mind too much. When he'd come to the capital from the northern borders, passed the military exams, and earned a place in the imperial guard, he had dreamed of making a name for himself. But looking back, his three years in the palace seemed rather flavorless.

He'd always just gone with the flow. Neither competitive nor ambitious, he stayed where he was placed. He didn't compete with others, nor did he hold any aspirations.

For a man, that wasn't the ideal. A man was supposed to provide for his family and bring honor to his name. If he lacked the skills to do so, his wife and children would go hungry; if he didn't achieve anything, his family wouldn't prosper. But Situ Jin's situation was an exception in those regards. He had lost his parents when he was young, and he grew up in an isolated northern town under his neighbors' care. Though the town was small, swordsmen often passed through. They'd taught him to use the saber—one teacher per move—until he knew how to slash, strike, and later kill.

One day, the town elders said, "You've grown up, A-Jin. Time to go out and make something of yourself." He took the saber he'd earned working for the blacksmith and traveled to the capital, still alone, without any support. It had been a snowy day. Back in his hometown, everyone would already have closed their doors by that hour, but the capital was bustling, the streets packed shoulder to shoulder. He carefully held his saber toward his side to avoid accidentally jabbing someone with the scabbard. Despite the crowds, he was still alone. The noise and excitement had nothing to do with him.

Not that being alone bothered him. As long as he could take care of himself, that was more than enough. Now Situ Jin reached to touch his wound, and sharp pain stopped him in his tracks. Still, changing the bandages shouldn't be too much of a hassle. He took a breath and continued walking.

“Captain Situ?” a clear, melodious voice, like the chirping of a bird, called from his right.

Situ Jin’s heart inexplicably skipped a beat. He slowly turned and saw a girl standing on the doorstep of her house, a bamboo basket on her back. She was dressed in a frost-colored gown of fine cotton, her large, luminous eyes trained on him. Too shy to look at her face directly, he dropped his gaze to her hand, which rested on the door knocker. Her exposed wrist was as pale as the moon—a captivating sight.

Ah. He knew what her name was: Mingyue.[16] Zhu Mingyue. A lovely name.

Her family ran a medical clinic. Dr. Zhu was renowned in the area, hailed as a miracle worker who could cure any illness. But his beautiful daughter was more celebrated still. Ruffians would deliberately injure themselves just to glimpse Mingyue at the clinic. Situ’s house stood directly across from hers, and when he rode out for duty, he often saw her walking to the clinic with her medicine basket. Still, they’d never spoken.

So how did she know his name was Situ?

Mingyue pointed to his waist. “Your lower back is bloody. Are you injured, Captain Situ?”

Situ Jin was stunned. He reached back, and pain speared through him. He hadn’t even realized that he was injured there.

Mingyue tittered, then beckoned him over. “Oh, you’re such a fool! Come in. Let me bandage it for you. My father’s home too—he’s the best at treating injuries.”

Situ Jin hesitated. “I can manage…”

Mingyue feigned anger, slapping the doorframe. “Can you even *reach* your own lower back? Come inside.” Without giving Situ Jin a chance to refuse, she turned and walked inside. She had always been impulsive, with a temper as fiery as her spirit. Between her temperament and the way she was always wandering around, finding a good husband would be a challenge for her. Situ Jin couldn’t help but worry on her behalf. Then again, he’d always been something of a worrywart, the type to fuss over nothing.

With no other choice, Situ Jin straightened his tattered uniform and followed Mingyue into the house.

Chapter 24:
The Mountain Demon

BY THE START of the third month, new buds had sprouted on the branches, and the chill slowly faded. The charcoal braziers were removed from the palaces. Rain grew more common, falling endlessly, day after day. The sky overhead was painted a heavy gray. It loomed low like a weight pressing down on the world below.

Xiahou Lian's shoulder stitches had been removed, leaving behind a hideously twisted scar that stretched from his upper shoulder over his shoulder blade. It was a harrowing sight. Shen Jue suggested looking into a scar-removing ointment, but Xiahou Lian refused. For a man, scars were badges of honor; perfectly smooth, flawless skin was effeminate.

Now that Xiahou Lian's injuries had healed, Shen Jue allowed him to go for occasional strolls, telling the others that Sixi's smallpox was cured. The older eunuchs praised Shen Jue for his loyalty and kindheartedness. Anyone else would've avoided a smallpox-stricken eunuch like the plague he carried—perhaps even covered their nose in disgust. Finding someone willing to care for such a patient day and night would usually just have been wishful thinking.

While Xiahou Lian recuperated, Shen Jue often visited the kitchen to purchase leftover bird's nest soup to help the other boy regain his strength. The palace was known for lavishness and excess. Although the palace concubines had small appetites, they demanded that exquisite dishes fill their tables daily, leaving each one barely touched. The sharp, resourceful kitchen eunuchs capitalized on this by selling the leftovers to greedy eunuchs and maids; that had turned into a profitable venture.

A few days previously, the kitchen had welcomed a new head eunuch, and the portions in Shen Jue's meal boxes had suddenly almost doubled. Sometimes they even included delicacies such as abalone or shark fin. Shen Jue accepted the change without comment.

Today, as usual, he picked up his boxed meal from the kitchen and hurried back, holding it in both hands. Eunuchs were servants, dogs raised

by their masters. They couldn’t walk with their heads held high; they were to keep their faces down and kneel whenever they met nobles on the road. Over time, Shen Jue had grown accustomed to that humble posture. He could now perform it effortlessly.

He knew that everything required patience. If he wished to stand above tens of thousands one day, he must first grovel in the dust.

Just as he passed Tian Street, someone pounced on him from behind. The meal box Shen Jue was carrying hindered his movements. Soon, he found himself pinned against the palace wall.

Suppressing the murderous urge surging in his heart, he asked coldly, “Liu-gonggong, what are you trying to do?”

The kitchen’s lead eunuch, Liu Deyi, stood a full head taller than Shen Jue. His dark complexion was paired with a constant smile that lent him an air of simple honesty. “I treat you to fine meals every day, and you still can’t take my hints? Do you think you could afford delicacies like abalone and shark fin with what little money you have?” He looked Shen Jue up and down, then sighed regretfully. “I’ve been spoiling you a while now, so why are you still so skinny? It’s uncomfortable to hold you.”

“The kitchens are at their busiest right now. Aren’t you afraid something will go wrong if you’re not there?” Shen Jue kept his head down, obscuring his expression. His voice was calm, as if he didn’t realize his predicament.

Liu Deyi took Shen Jue’s response as acceptance. Secretly pleased, he took things a step further, lowering his hand to rub Shen Jue’s shoulder. “If you behave, I can get back quicker.”

Shen Jue sneered. “Two teapots without spouts—are we ground mirrors or cut-sleeves?”[17]

Liu Deyi let out a lecherous chuckle, his rough hand sliding down Shen Jue’s arm to cover the young man’s fingers. Shen Jue stared at his own hand. If he’d been carrying a knife, he might’ve been tempted to slice both their hands off then and there.

“What are you talking about?” Liu Deyi asked. “The palace is already an absurd place, isn’t it? The higher someone’s rank, the more scandalously they behave. The emperor indulges in incest, the empress carries on secret

affairs, and the princes plot against one another. So what if two men mess around? It's not a big deal! What's more, even if others don't see us as real men, we should still have some self-respect in that regard. In my case, no one mistakes me for a woman even after my castration. But *you*, well..."

"What about me?" Shen Jue asked.

Liu Deyi jabbed Shen Jue's cheek. "Just look at you—so alluring, a natural seductress. I'd say you were born in the wrong body. And a woman's destiny is a woman's destiny, so in the end, you couldn't avoid having your unnecessary parts removed."

Shen Jue let out a low, humorless laugh. The shadows in his eyes deepened, turning bottomless. "Is that so?" he asked quietly. "This is my destiny?"

"Ah—Sixi mentioned earlier that he had feelings for you. At first, I thought you had a fiery temper, and since I prefer consent over coercion, I didn't plan to push you. I never guessed that cur Sixi would actually succeed, but look at you two now, so sweet and inseparable." Liu Deyi stroked his chin and added, "If I'd made my move, there's no way that shameless fool could've competed with me. Sixi has no prospects. Why don't you join up with me instead? Just nod, and I'll get you out of the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard."

Shen Jue slowly lifted his head, a sinister smile playing on his lips. Liu Deyi gazed down into Shen Jue's eyes, so shadowed and brooding, as though a demon lurked within their depths. Suddenly uneasy, Liu Deyi couldn't help but wonder why the boy's stare was so chilling.

"Then do you know," Shen Jue said, stressing each word, "that being with me comes at a cost?" His every syllable sent a ripple of disquiet through Liu Deyi.

Liu Deyi was from a family of hunters and had spent his childhood in the mountains and forests. His mother had raised him on tales of mountain demons that feasted on humans under the cover of night. In the cold, damp woods, solitary travelers had to be wary not only of the wild animals that could pounce unexpectedly but also of the mountain demons concealed in the shadows. Behind trees, beneath leaves, or below rocks—wherever darkness lingered, mountain demons might be waiting.

His mother’s stories had often scared him sleepless, but he never actually saw a mountain demon. Over time, he realized such stories were just his mother’s way of teasing him. But in this moment, he felt as if he was staring into the cold, menacing eyes of such a demon watching him intently, fangs bared and slavering for blood.

Though his heart trembled, he forced a smile to try to hold on to his pride. “What’s your price? Tell me.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, a heavy punch slammed into the side of his face, accompanied by a thunderous roar. “You blind mutt! How dare you lay a hand on my brother?!”

Liu Deyi was still reeling, stunned by the punch, as he was seized by the collar and kicked hard in the chest and stomach. He collapsed against the wall, vomiting bile. Before he could steady himself, Xiahou Lian delivered a sharp hook to his face, sending him sprawling to the ground. The blows didn’t stop—a relentless barrage of kicks followed, buffeting his body without pause. Liu Deyi howled in agony, pleading for mercy.

“You son of a bitch! What filthy scum dares to lay a hand on my brother?! I’ll beat you until you’re crawling on the ground, or my name isn’t Xiahou...” His attacker coughed. “Sixi!”

Shen Jue stood frozen, stunned. Xiahou Lian had appeared out of nowhere. Shen Jue had planned to deal with Liu-gonggong himself, but in the blink of an eye, Xiahou Lian had reduced the man to a whimpering mess.

“Sixi!” Liu Deyi screamed upon hearing the name. “You selfish bastard! You can touch him, but I can’t?!”

“Touch him, my ass! I’ll make you sorry right now!” Xiahou Lian was seething with rage, his vision blurred. He yanked up his robe and straddled Liu Deyi’s waist, slapping his face left and right. “How do you like this? I said, how do you like this?!”

Liu Deyi’s face was a mess of snot, tears, and drool. He couldn’t even spit out curses between the volley of slaps. Xiahou Lian’s blows felt like being struck with iron. Before long, Liu Deyi’s head and face were swollen beyond recognition, resembling a bloated pig’s.

“Not my face! Not my face!” Liu Deyi managed to cry during a brief lull. But Xiahou Lian—being Xiahou Lian—made sure every slap landed squarely across Liu Deyi’s features. Each hit its mark without fail. The relentless strikes disoriented Liu Deyi; his head spun from the assault, and stars twinkled in his eyes.

After a few dozen more slaps, Xiahou Lian finally stopped. His hands throbbed, his shoulder wound burning from the strain. He couldn’t tell whether it was bleeding again.

“Grandfather Sixi, spare me!” cried Liu Deyi.

Xiahou Lian grabbed Liu Deyi’s head and yanked it toward Shen Jue. “Begging me for mercy is pointless! Beg your *father* for forgiveness! Go on—call him Daddy!”

“Daddy Shen, spare me!” Liu Deyi sobbed. “Please make him stop before he kills me!”

Shen Jue gave Xiahou Lian a dark look. “You’re his grandfather, but I’m only Daddy?”

“Sorry, sorry. My mistake!” Xiahou Lian punched Liu Deyi again. “Can’t you speak properly? Call him Grandfather Shen!”

“Oh, mighty ancestors, I beg you to let me go this time! I swear I’ll never do it again!” Liu Deyi didn’t dare voice any grievance. He wailed miserably, his swollen, bruised face streaked with tears.

Xiahou Lian stood and dusted off his robe. “Fine. I’ll let you off this time. But if it happens again, I’ll kill you, you bastard.”

Liu Deyi struggled to his feet and staggered away. Once he’d reached a safe distance, he turned back and spat at Xiahou Lian and Shen Jue. “You little brats! I’ll make sure you pay for this! Remember that!” he shouted. Then he ran off, clutching his head.

Xiahou Lian scoffed. “Coward.”

Shen Jue knew that they might be eating spoiled food over the coming days, but he didn’t mention that. Instead, he called to Xiahou Lian, “Let’s go. Everyone must be starving.”

Xiahou Lian agreed and followed him. Shen Jue walked with his head bowed, deep in thought, and didn’t say a word.

Now that his energy was returning, Xiahou Lian had wanted to help with Shen Jue's work. When he realized that the other boy hadn't returned, even though the night grew late, he'd gone out to look for him. After only a few steps, he'd spotted the eunuch pressing Shen Jue against the wall, hands wandering. Enraged, Xiahou Lian hadn't thought twice; he'd just swung his fist directly at the eunuch's face.

Homosexuality was prevalent in their dynasty. Emperor Chengzong and Emperor Muzong were both famously homosexual. During their reigns, the leaders of the Directorate of Ceremonial had used flattery and flirtation to win their positions and the emperor's favor, leading to chaos in the court. As the saying went, "When the upper beams are crooked, the lower beams warp as well." The palace became increasingly decadent. Eunuchs with even a modicum of power were no longer content with just women and preyed on men as well. The same was true of the common folk: Male performers began to regularly sing and play the zither in brothels, much to the delight of the wealthy and powerful. Even Garden-operated brothels featured such performers. That was reputedly how Xiahou Lian's Qiu-shifu had started his career.

Some might have found all that tolerable, but Shen Jue came from a prestigious family. How could he endure that kind of humiliation? Xiahou Lian felt a pang of sorrow, but he was awkward with words. No matter how he racked his brain, he couldn't think of a way to console Shen Jue.

Speeding up a few steps, Xiahou Lian took the meal box from Shen Jue's hands. He glanced sideways. The sunlight bathed Shen Jue's face in a warm golden glow, though his expression remained blank, his skin as pale and sickly as ever. His thoughts had grown increasingly difficult to guess, leaving Xiahou Lian feeling perplexed.

After passing through the palace gate, Shen Jue set down the meal box and went inside. Xiahou Lian delivered the food to the mad consorts' chambers. Some were singing or embroidering, but Consort Gao was flailing around. Her hair was adorned with a bouquet of feathers, giving her the look of a puffed-up rooster. The old eunuchs said that Consort Gao had deteriorated lately, growing madder. Once, she'd spent her days sitting on the wall, calling for the emperor; now she scaled the rooftops, declaring herself a legendary hero. Xiahou Lian chased her around for a while before

she finally sat down to eat obediently. Duties complete, Xiahou Lian skipped his own meal and rushed to Shen Jue.

Entering the room, Xiahou Lian saw Shen Jue standing shirtless by the washstand. Shen Jue had a good physique; his skin was as pale as jade, his muscles well-defined, and his limbs were long and graceful, though somewhat thin. Unlike Xiahou Lian, whose countless scars suggested that he'd walked through fire and blades, Shen Jue had smooth, unmarred skin. His back was turned, and Xiahou Lian could only glimpse his disgusted expression and clenched teeth in the bronze mirror. Wet cloth in hand, Shen Jue scrubbed madly at his shoulders and arms where Liu Deyi had touched him. Although Liu Deyi's hands had only grazed his clothing, Shen Jue seemed to want to scour off his own skin.

Xiahou Lian snatched the cloth from him. "Stop scrubbing!"

"What are you doing?!" Shen Jue shouted angrily.

"Are you going to scrub your skin off?!"

"Mind your own business! Get out!"

Shen Jue's furious expression made Xiahou Lian feel somewhat relieved. His deadened look earlier had unsettled Xiahou Lian far more.

"Stay still." Xiahou Lian opened a cabinet and grabbed a bar of soap. He worked it into a lather on Shen Jue's shoulders and arms, massaging them gently with his palms. Though Xiahou Lian's hands were calloused from years of saber practice, they felt oddly soothing against Shen Jue's skin.

Ears flushing red, Shen Jue muttered, "I told you to mind your own business."

Xiahou Lian rolled his eyes. "You should be grateful. I'm going out of my way to serve you, and here you are complaining. I'm never this careful, even washing *myself*." Indeed, Xiahou Lian had never been so meticulous in his life. He treated Shen Jue like a priceless piece of porcelain he was afraid to break or damage, behaving almost as if he wished to polish the other boy to a flawless shine.

He couldn't have explained why, but Xiahou Lian felt that Shen Jue was born to be revered and worshipped. With his striking looks and

scholarly intellect, who could possibly have measured up? He should've been serving in the imperial court, making his mark on history—if not for his descendants, then at least for the sake of his own legacy. But fate had dealt him a cruel hand, and now he was a eunuch. His ambitions had been reduced to dust, future children now a mere dream. Worse, he had to endure humiliation at the hands of scoundrels like Sixi and Liu Deyi. How could anyone not have felt anguish and resentment?

Fate was hard to defy. If the heavens wished you to fall into the mud, then even if you grew golden wings, they'd be melted away.

Xiahou Lian tamped down the ache in his chest. He dipped the washcloth in water, then gently wiped the soap from Shen Jue's arms. The cloth soaked up the fine lather to reveal smooth, clean skin beneath. The soap's osmanthus scent left a subtle, sweet fragrance lingering on Shen Jue's arms.

"Done. You're clean!"

Shen Jue tilted his head. "My face too," he said softly.

Xiahou Lian obliged. He moistened the soap and gently rubbed it over Shen Jue's face, then massaged it in with his fingertips.

Shen Jue felt an odd sensation, as if a feather were tickling his heart. He wanted to push Xiahou Lian's hand away but couldn't bring himself to act. While he hesitated, Xiahou Lian finished cleaning him. He withdrew his hand and tossed the washcloth into the basin, leaving Shen Jue with an inexplicable sense of loss.

There were people in the palace who treated Shen Jue kindly, but he always remained cautious, building walls around himself and keeping a polite distance. When he suffered, he bore it silently. It was nothing new; he was accustomed to enduring. But with Xiahou Lian, he let his guard down.

How nice, he thought. He was like a stray dog wandering the vast world, fur dirty and paws worn, who'd suddenly found shelter from the wind and rain. However many beatings or hardships he faced outside, he at least had a place to rest from now on.

But perhaps that was too optimistic—his shelter was clearly a bit drafty. As Xiahou Lian returned the soap to the toiletry shelf, he lost his

grip and sent it tumbling to the floor, where it picked up a new coating of dust.

Shen Jue’s face darkened. “That’s the only one I have.” Complaining that the palace soap smelled strange, he’d spent two months’ wages to have this osmanthus-scented soap delivered from outside.

Xiahou Lian apologized repeatedly as he retrieved, cleaned, and replaced the bar of soap. Shen Jue looked gloomily at it, thinking that he might as well throw it away.

Xiahou Lian grabbed the basin and headed out to dump the water. As he was about to open the door, Shen Jue's voice came from behind.

"I don't need your pity, Xiahou Lian."

Stubborn brat. Always unwilling to swallow his pride. Xiahou Lian sighed. "I don't pity you."

Shen Jue didn't reply. Xiahou Lian assumed the matter was settled and reached for the door. As he moved to open it, he felt a tug on the back of his robe. Turning, he saw Shen Jue, his head lowered, his bangs covering half his face. Xiahou Lian only caught a glimpse of the redness at the corners of his eyes.

Xiahou Lian, who couldn't stand to see anyone cry—especially not Shen Jue—panicked immediately. "What's wrong?"

"You're not allowed to leave, Xiahou Lian," Shen Jue said, suddenly pressing close and wrapping his arms tightly around the other boy. "I won't let you go!" Shen Jue's voice rang in his ears, and Xiahou Lian noticed that it was laced with a subtle tremor of fear.

How could he have forgotten? Shen Jue always clung stubbornly to his pride. However frightened or hurt he was, he stood tall and maintained his tattered dignity. It had been the same when he was the Xie family's neglected third young master; now, as a downtrodden palace servant, his pride remained unchanged.

Xiahou Lian was silent for a long time—so long that Shen Jue felt his blood turning cold. Finally, Xiahou Lian let out a long sigh. Holding the basin with one hand, he patted Shen Jue's back with the other and whispered, "All right. I won't leave."

Chapter 25:
Late Spring Chill

THE NEXT DAY, as expected, all their food was sabotaged. Liu Deyi—his pride wounded, and unwilling to show his face—instead had a young eunuch give Shen Jue his meal box. Shen Jue quietly slipped a handful of silver pieces into the hand of that eunuch, who weighed the silver in his palm and smiled.

"Shen-gonggong, you've always been clever," he remarked.

With that, he pulled a smaller boxed meal from under the table and handed it to Shen Jue. Then he returned half of Shen Jue's silver. "Come back tomorrow, and I'll have more for you. I don't need your silver. I can only get you one portion, though."

Shen Jue carried the meal box back. Consort Gao was perched on an embroidered stool, her hair again adorned with colorful feathers. She resembled a flamboyant rooster. Unfazed, Shen Jue set out her meal. Consort Gao picked up her chopsticks eagerly and took a bite, only to spit it out right away. "You little brat! Are you trying to poison me?!"

"This is all we have. Make do," Shen Jue said. He picked up the smaller meal box and turned to leave.

Consort Gao fluttered around him. "You heartless wretch!" she squawked. "You're keeping the good food for yourself! I won't stand for it!"

Shen Jue shot her a cold glance. "If you dare blabber in front of Sixi, I'll tear your tongue right out."

Consort Gao shrunk back, her once-proud feathers now drooping. She didn't dare provoke him further but still made faces behind his back.

Shen Jue ignored her and strode along the flowered walkway. The wound on Xiahou Lian's shoulder had reopened during the previous day's scuffle. When Shen Jue saw the blood seeping from it, his face had darkened, and he'd ordered Xiahou Lian to stay indoors and rest.

As he turned the corner by the moon gate, he saw Xiahou Lian leaning against a pillar. The boy grinned at him, head cocked, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Xiahou Lian's smile was always rakish, with a hint of playfulness and an inexplicable charm. Even the ugly mask he wore couldn't hide his knavish, flirtatious charm. A natural troublemaker with a honeyed tongue, he only needed to stand on the street to draw a flock of young ladies to his side.

Shen Jue had seen Xiahou Lian flirt with girls before. His memory of Guixiang, from the Xie household, calling the boy "Lian-gege" in a soft, sweet voice was still vivid. Recalling that, Shen Jue felt a twinge of irritation. He thrust the boxed meal into Xiahou Lian's hands. "Look at you, standing there like some showy courtesan," he snapped. "Why not borrow a few of Consort Gao's feathers? Even a brothel girl would pale in comparison to you."

Xiahou Lian chuckled. "I wouldn't dare. My looks can't compete with yours, Shaoye."

When Xiahou Lian opened the meal box, he saw only a bowl of plain rice and a dish of braised pork. The portion was much smaller than usual; Liu Deyi was clearly making things difficult for Shen Jue. What Xiahou Lian couldn't have imagined was that even this meager portion had to be bought with silver.

"Have you eaten?" Xiahou Lian asked.

"Yes, I've eaten. You finish this. I'll come back later for the box."

Xiahou Lian nodded and returned to his room. Consort Gao was clutching her lotus-and-fish-patterned bowl; she stared pitifully at Shen Jue, drool dripping down her chin.

Shen Jue sighed. "Stop staring. I'm eating the same rotten food as you."

Consort Gao glared at him. "You little traitor! Serving that pretty boy and feeding me slop! How dare you!" She angrily plucked the feathers from her hair, throwing them at Shen Jue, then stormed out of the courtyard.

Shen Jue didn't react.

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DURING THE RAINY SEASONS, the downpours in the capital were as relentless as the storms in the south. Rain fell day and night on the dark-tiled roofs, sounding like a cascade of shattered dishes. The palace's night patrols had doubled since the assassination; the guards made their rounds every quarter hour, rain or shine. The lanterns along the palace paths cast an eerie glow as the guards drifted through the storm like wraiths. Their metal armor could be heard clinking through the misty curtains of rain.

Liu Deyi crouched as he crept through the east gate and into the rear garden. Trees cast shadows like inky pools, the locust-tree trunks twisted like withered skeletons. A deathly pall clung to the leaves and flowers as if the rain had washed away their color. Liu Deyi didn't think that it was this eerie during the day, but at night, it practically felt haunted.

He walked until he reached a lantern. It was covered in gauze, glowing a soft green as it dangled from a stand about half a man's height. He paused to look around before heading north. After a few steps, a flash of red darted past the trees, nearly startling him into tumbling down. He steadied himself and looked again, but nothing was there.

Creeping forward cautiously, he let out a couple of quiet meows, then called out softly, "Shen Jue?"

No one answered. Liu Deyi chided himself in frustration, certain he was imagining things; his mind was playing tricks on him.

A short distance ahead appeared a series of linked pavilions with dark-tiled roofs and gracefully curved eaves. A decorative bridge spanned the water like a cloud hanging low over the waves. Overcome with anticipation, Liu Deyi quickened his steps and rushed onto the bridge. He scrutinized his surroundings through the rain, back hunched and heart racing, as he waited for the person he so desperately wanted to see.

After a long while, no one had appeared. Liu Deyi's excitement turned into disappointment, then anger. He had been tricked! Not only had that Shen Jue struck him, the boy was now playing him for a fool!

Liu Deyi had stood there for so long that even the misty drizzle had soaked him through. Just when he'd decided to leave, shivering, he noticed something yellow on the bridge railing. It appeared to be a cloth bundle.

Could it be from Shen Jue? Was he posing a riddle for Liu Deyi?

Liu Deyi's spirits soared, and he rushed over to the bundle. As he reached for it, his foot slipped on some slick substance, and he lost his balance, crashing into the marble railing. Unbeknownst to him, the railing was already on its last legs, riddled with cracks. It shattered on impact. Liu Deyi tumbled into the lotus pond alongside chunks of broken marble.

Shen Jue watched the scene indifferently from beneath the old locust tree across the pond. Then he turned and walked away.

As the night deepened, the guards increased their patrolling. Shen Jue stood among the shadows cast by the leaves and flowers, silently counting the seconds. Just as a group of guards moved along the covered walkway, he slipped from the bushes and onto the walkway himself, moving swiftly with hurried, careful steps. He pictured the map of the rear garden—after passing one more flower-viewing pavilion, he would reach the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard.

The walkway lanterns swayed in the breeze, their glow flickering. The wind chimes softly tinkled out a series of notes. Shen Jue was moments from rounding the corner when two hands shot out from behind him. They clamped over his mouth and pulled him swiftly into a nearby house.

His heart sank. As he instinctively began to struggle, a voice hissed, "You little brat, sneaking out at night! Are you off to meet a girl?"

It was Consort Gao!

Shen Jue was about to respond when Consort Gao suddenly tightened her grip on his mouth and pointed outside. Together, they moved slowly and silently to the door, where they heard two guards walking by.

"Will anyone notice that we took a piss here?" one asked.

"Who cares?" responded the other. "The rain will wash it all away anyway."

As their footsteps faded, Shen Jue began to tremble. If those two guards had done their business around the corner earlier, then if Shen Jue

had turned when he'd planned to, he'd have run straight into them.

Shen Jue glanced over and noticed Consort Gao still listening intently to the noises beyond the door. In the faint light, he could just make out her red inner robe with its floral embroidery. Her breasts seemed unusually full, nearly twice their normal size. When Consort Gao caught him staring at her bosom, she swiftly slapped him.

"You shameless pervert!" she snapped.

"What was that for?" a baffled Shen Jue demanded.

"You were staring at my chest!"

Shen Jue was speechless. Then again, she had just saved him. He took a deep breath and asked calmly, "What do you have in your robe?"

Consort Gao averted her gaze. "Nothing! I've just gained some weight, that's all!" she stammered.

"You were going to have good food tomorrow," Shen Jue told her patiently, "but if you don't show me, you won't get any of it."

"Hmph! I don't believe you! Just because you fool that silly boy in your room, you think you can fool me too?"

Shen Jue's patience snapped. "What have I fooled him about?"

Consort Gao spat on the ground. "I'm not stupid! I know you make him play with you, work for you—even sleep with you!"

Her words struck a nerve, and Shen Jue's throat tightened. He hadn't told Xiahou Lian that the Garuda had come to the palace looking for him, nor had he revealed how he'd exploited Liu Deyi's harassment to convince Xiahou Lian to stay. At some point, he had grown accustomed to scheming and manipulation—and if it kept Xiahou Lian by his side, he was willing to lie and withhold truths. Would Xiahou Lian ever find out? If he did, would he despise Shen Jue for it?

It doesn't matter, Shen Jue told himself. As long as he kept his secret, no one would know that he'd seen the Garuda.

But he hadn't expected Consort Gao, of all people, to see through his carefully woven cover-up. "You're growing more delusional," he sneered.

“You should visit the imperial physicians’ office tomorrow and have one of them examine you properly.”

Before he could continue, several greasy meat buns rolled from Consort Gao’s robe. They tumbled to the floor as Shen Jue watched in silence.

Tears welling in her eyes, Consort Gao picked up the buns. “My buns! It’s all your fault! You’re such a monster!” she wailed, lips quivering as if she were mourning the loss of a child.

At some point, the rain had stopped. After many overcast days, the sky finally cleared, and the clouds parted to reveal a full moon. The ground glistened with rainwater, reflecting scattered fragments of silver moonlight. Shen Jue and Consort Gao passed through Shunzhen Gate, quietly shutting it behind them. As they walked along the moonlit path, which shimmered like frost, Consort Gao continued to clutch the dirtied meat buns, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

Shen Jue sighed deeply and went to a secondary kitchen, returning with a small box of pastries. Handing it to Consort Gao, he said, “This is my private stash, and it’s all I have left. Make it last.”

Consort Gao was both surprised and touched. She quickly tucked the pastries into her robe. “I was wrong,” she said tearfully. “You’re a good person!”

Shen Jue ignored her, exasperated, and turned to go back to his room. His clothes were damp, so he stood outside to wring the rainwater out of them before entering. Inside, he decided against bathing; it was late, and he didn’t want to wake Xiahou Lian. He simply lay down on the small daybed. In the darkness, Xiahou Lian turned over in the heated bed.

“Shaoye? Where did you go so late?” he mumbled sleepily.

Shen Jue’s hands were cold. He blew on them before replying, “I went to relieve myself.”

“And it took that long? Wow. Are you constipated, Shaoye?” Xiahou Lian was more awake now and sounded alarmed. “You’ll get hemorrhoids if you’re not careful. You should drink some laxative tea tomorrow.”

Shen Jue glanced at him but didn’t respond.

“Why are you sleeping on the daybed?” Xiahou Lian added.

Shen Jue’s heart skipped a beat as he recalled Consort Gao’s earlier accusation that he made Xiahou Lian sleep with him. That madwoman was always spouting nonsense. Shen Jue closed his eyes, saying, “Sharing a bed’s inconvenient. I’ll sleep here.”

Xiahou Lian was puzzled. Shen Jue’s thinking was always so bizarre, and they had been sleeping together just fine. Had Xiahou Lian done something to upset him? Was he dirty? Did he smell bad? Or was this because he wore Sixi’s ugly face?

Whatever. Leave it at that. Giving up, Xiahou Lian sat upright, placed his bare feet on the ground, and walked to Shen Jue’s daybed. Without a word, he scooped Shen Jue into his arms.

Startled, Shen Jue flailed. “What are you doing?!” he shouted.

Having lived a life of deprivation in the palace, Shen Jue was scarcely more than skin and bones. He was practically light as a feather. Xiahou Lian carried him to the bed easily, saying, “It’s not right for a young master to sleep on a daybed while his servant sleeps in a better bed.” With that, he turned and walked back to the daybed, then slipped under its covers.

Shen Jue was silent for a moment, then pulled up the blankets and went to sleep.

As the sky gradually paled with the next day’s dawn, the palace’s upper crust remained nestled in bed while the servants were already bustling around. Some of them lit lanterns, some swept and cleaned, and others prepared breakfast. At one point, the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard had been a neglected corner of the palace where servants tended to sleep until the sun was high. But since Shen Jue’s arrival—though he didn’t demand that the servants rise as early as those in other courtyards—they at least had to be up in time to fetch his breakfast.

No one complained, since they now *had* breakfast to eat. Moreover, Shen Jue was amiable and doled out rewards and punishments fairly. Everyone had come to appreciate his goodness.

When Xiahou Lian was injured, he’d ignored the servants’ routines and stayed in his room, sleeping around the clock. Now that he felt better,

however, he took it upon himself to help with the chores. Young and strong, he handled all the cleaning, on top of other menial tasks.

The other eunuchs "Sixi" worked with were also young—twelve or thirteen years old and full of energy. They often gossiped while working.

"Hey, Sixi, guess what I saw when I went to the kitchen to fetch breakfast this morning?" one said.

Before Xiahou Lian could respond, another chimed in, "What did you see? The new palace ladies? I heard they're as beautiful as celestial maidens, and the emperor can't decide which one to choose!"

"Pah! You're missing a piece downstairs and *still* thinking about women?" Rolling his eyes, the young eunuch continued, "Someone drowned in Yuqing Pool last night. It was gruesome—the body was all bloated, like dough. You could poke it and leave a dent."

"So what?" someone else scoffed. "How many people have drowned in that pool since the founding of our Great Qi dynasty? Palace concubines, eunuchs, maids—cats and dogs, for that matter. What's so strange about that?"

The young eunuch went on. "Yes, but this guy was *really* unlucky. The guards said he snuck into the kitchen late at night and stole gold and silver cups. He probably planned to resell them to one of the glasswork sellers at Liulichang. But he slipped and fell, and the railing was already cracked, so he tumbled right into the water. After the emperor built the west garden's new leopard enclosure, he stopped visiting the rear gardens, so the eunuchs and maids there slacked off. No one even noticed that cracked railing. Good thing it was just a thieving eunuch who died; if it'd been some bigwig, a lot of people would've been in trouble!"

"You've been talking and talking, but you still haven't said who died," Xiahou Lian interjected.

The young eunuch scratched his head. "Oh, right. It was Liu-gonggong from the kitchen."

Startled, Xiahou Lian fell silent, his mind racing. Shen Jue had gone out last night—could this be related?

He couldn’t shake the feeling that Shen Jue was involved. After all, Sixi had died for harassing Shen Jue. And Shen Jue was vindictive; he came from a noble family. He had studied the Four Books and Five Classics, as well as principles of hierarchy and morality. Even as a servant, his arrogance was unchanged—he couldn’t tolerate the humiliation he’d faced. It was miraculous that he hadn’t skinned that eunuch alive.

But why was he being so reckless? Even Xiahou Lian would’ve thought twice before brandishing his saber beneath the emperor’s nose.

Xiahou Lian set down his broom and went looking for Shen Jue. Shen Jue was always busy with something; it was hard to track him down.

After some searching, he finally found Shen Jue on a walkway. Shen Jue had just returned from the Embroidery Bureau, carrying the consorts’ summer outfits. In the palace, status gave rise to sycophancy, and everyone knew who to prioritize. The eunuchs had already rushed to deliver the summer wardrobes to places like Zhongcui Palace and Yonghe Palace. But for a neglected corner like the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard, Shen Jue had to continually chase after the items himself to finally secure them.

Shen Jue saw Xiahou Lian but didn’t get the chance to greet him before Xiahou Lian approached him and asked in a low voice, “Did you hear about Liu Deyi’s death?”

Shen Jue glanced at him. “Yes, I heard. What about it?”

Xiahou Lian studied his calm expression, unsure whether Shen Jue was involved. Hesitantly, he asked, “Did he really fall into the pond by accident?”

“Of course not,” Shen Jue replied bluntly. “I did it. What—are you here to scold me? I didn’t know you were so soft.”

“It really was you!” Xiahou Lian grabbed his wrist. “Are you out of your mind? Why didn’t you discuss something so dangerous with me?”

“I could handle it myself. You focus on recovering—and mind your own business!” Shen Jue shook off Xiahou Lian’s hand and walked away.

Xiahou Lian followed close behind, gritting his teeth. “What kind of attitude is that? You don’t treat me like a brother—you don’t want my help.

So why did you ask me to stay? As a decoration? As a pretty vase—something nice to look at?”

Shen Jue paused at Xiahou Lian’s words. Were they brothers, or master and servant? In retrospect, he’d never really thought of Xiahou Lian as either brother or servant. So what exactly was Xiahou Lian to him?

Shen Jue couldn’t figure it out and felt increasingly agitated. Afraid that Xiahou Lian would press further, he snapped, “Who says we’re brothers? Do we share the same parents?”

Taken aback, Xiahou Lian stood still for a moment. *Hunh. That’s right.* Shen Jue had never actually called him a brother—Xiahou Lian had just assumed that. But after mulling it over now, even he found it laughable.

Glancing up quickly, Xiahou Lian saw Shen Jue already walking away. He chased after him. “Fine. We don’t have to be brothers. But you can’t go around killing people!”

“Why not? You can, so why can’t I?”

Shen Jue’s thoughts whirled as Xiahou Lian replied in a strained voice, “Because you’re different! Your hands are meant for holding brushes, not shedding blood!”

His simple words cut through Shen Jue like a knife. His old wounds instantly reopened, oozing fresh blood.

“Meant for holding brushes.” The phrase echoed in Shen Jue’s mind. His grip on the summer clothes tightened, crumpling the fabric. How long had it been since he last held a brush? As a eunuch, he wasn’t even allotted ink or paper. Since entering the palace, he’d handled brooms, chamber pots, and laundry—but never a brush.

Ridiculous, Shen Jue thought. Xiahou Lian was such a fool. Did he really think Shen Jue could go back to how things were?

“Xie Jinglan is dead, Xiahou Lian. The person standing before you now is Shen Jue,” he said slowly, his pale face as cold as frost. “Shen Jue is a eunuch—a servant, a dog raised by his masters. What use would he have for a brush?”

“You—” Xiahou Lian’s heart ached, but he couldn’t find a response. After a long pause, he finally said with difficulty, “Shaoye, you’re not like

me. I’m an assassin. I’ve already taken two or three lives, and a few more won’t make a difference. From now on, if you need someone killed, just tell me. I’ll do it for you. I’ll kill anyone who wrongs you. Anyone who insults you, I’ll cut them down!”

“What’s the difference?” Shen Jue smiled mockingly. “Is holding a brush really so different from holding a blade? You’re naive, Xiahou Lian. A blade can take one life, but power can destroy an entire family. When the emperor is angered, millions die, and blood flows for miles! Brushes and seals are the filthiest weapons in this world. You think assassins have the bloodiest hands? No, the person who most deserves to go to hell is the man on the throne in Fengxian Hall, worshipped by the masses!”

“I...I know, but...” Xiahou Lian stammered, his mind in turmoil. He scratched his head, unsure how to react.

“You just don’t want me to go down that path, do you?” Shen Jue asked calmly.

“Exactly!” Xiahou Lian couldn’t have cared less about the emperor. All he knew was that Xie Jinglan had once said that he would retreat to the countryside while the eunuchs remained in power, but that he’d help stabilize the nation again after they were gone. How could it be that Shen Jue was now one of the very eunuchs Xie Jinglan had condemned?

Xiahou Lian took a deep breath and said, “Shaoye, you don’t understand. Once blood stains your hands, there’s no turning back. Killing becomes addictive. You kill once, and then again and again. You begin to see people as little more than blades of grass—they die, and that’s it. Is that truly what you want, Shaoye?”

He waited for Shen Jue to answer, but the other boy’s expression remained indifferent and icy. Turning to look at Xiahou Lian, he said slowly, “Huh? Why shouldn’t I?”

Xiahou Lian’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“Xiahou Lian, let me ask you—why do you kill?” Shen Jue’s voice was calm.

Xiahou Lian hesitated. “To survive.”

“So do I, then,” Shen Jue said with a faint smile. “I’ve started down this path already. Even if it leads to ruin, I won’t turn back. I’ll avenge Aunt Lan, kill Wei De, take control of the Eastern Depot, and become the leader of the Directorate of Ceremonial. If you don’t want to see me do so, leave.”

With those words, Shen Jue straightened the folds of the summer garments in his arms and walked away without a backward glance. Beneath the endless expanse of sky, his solitary figure looked both resolute and lonely.

Xiahou Lian watched him retreat. For a long time, he was at a loss.

Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian didn’t speak for several days after that. Shen Jue threw himself into his duties, indifferent to Xiahou Lian’s thoughts. Xiahou Lian didn’t loiter either; he was often away, though no one knew what he was up to. At night, they returned to the same room, extinguished the lights, and went to sleep without a word.

One day, Shen Jue was serving Consort Gao her meal. The kitchen had welcomed a new steward, and their meals had returned to normal. Consort Gao was so delighted that she’d practically rolled on the floor. She had recently become obsessed with makeup, painting her face as red as a monkey’s backside and caking on so much powder that it flaked off when she spoke. Her lunacy had reached new heights, and even the other mad concubines avoided her, as if terrified that her insanity would outshine theirs. Only Shen Jue could still speak with her calmly.

After setting out the dishes, Shen Jue turned and saw Xiahou Lian standing just beyond the threshold of the room, watching him.

“What do you want?” Shen Jue asked coldly.

Xiahou Lian pulled a three-foot-long wooden saber from behind his back and extended it.

Shen Jue looked at the wooden saber, puzzled. Did Xiahou Lian plan to kill him with it? Did he think Shen Jue would become a threat in the future and wish to nip it in the bud?

“I’m afraid you’ll get yourself killed, so I’m going to teach you some useful saber moves. Then, if you ever slip up and get thrown in prison, you might be able to escape using your peerless swordplay.” Xiahou Lian sighed mockingly. “After you bust out, you can come find me. If you have

some proper skills under your belt, maybe I can find you a job.” With that, Xiahou Lian gripped the saber in both hands, swung it in a smooth arc, and pointed the tip at Shen Jue.

Shen Jue chuckled coldly.

“What—you don’t think I’m skilled enough?” Xiahou Lian raised an eyebrow.

Shen Jue stepped over the threshold, walked up to Xiahou Lian, and plucked the wooden saber from his hands. “Meet me by the palace wall at nine tonight.”

Chapter 26:
Cherishing the Late Spring

THE MOONLIGHT was like water; the wind rustled through the trees.

Xiahou Lian stood motionless, saber in hand, as swirling leaves danced before him. His robe flapped in the breeze amid the leaves' rustling.

In the next instant, his blade flashed.

Xiahou Lian drew his saber. Under the moonlight, its gleaming edge gave the impression of rippling waves emanating outward in rings. Xiahou Lian stepped lightly on the moonlit ground, his blade's tip tracing a graceful arc. As his gaze focused on the blade, it was as if the wind in the courtyard fell silent. Xiahou Lian's swordsmanship was clean and precise, with no unnecessary flourishes, reminiscent of the clear breeze and radiant moon in a pine forest. When he swung the saber, it caused a wind that swept through the courtyard like a roaring tide.

After a few moves, Xiahou Lian sheathed his saber and smirked at Shen Jue, who stood nearby. "Did you get all that?"

Shen Jue thought over the moves Xiahou Lian had just demonstrated. Weighing the wooden saber in his hand, he frowned, not responding.

"Qiye Garden's saber techniques differ from styles that emphasize physical strength and friendly sparring. Our methods are designed to kill. Every attack must draw blood. There's no room for showy, ineffective maneuvers. It's about being ruthless, cunning, and efficient—fast, accurate, and deadly," Xiahou Lian explained. He gripped his saber. "You needn't master it all, just enough to deal with those who dare cross the line."

Shen Jue thought for a moment. "The moves you just demonstrated differ from what you described."

"How so?"

Shen Jue glanced at Xiahou Lian, then stepped into the center of the courtyard, holding the wooden saber. He bent his knees slightly, assuming a starting stance. Xiahou Lian was leaning against the wall, watching with

interest, when suddenly a piece of osmanthus cake appeared in front of him. Xiahou Lian took it absentmindedly, only to turn in shock and see Consort Gao seated on a nearby rock, happily munching her own piece of cake.

"Hey, you—"

"Shh!" Consort Gao put a finger to her lips. "Watch the saber."

Shen Jue moved.

The crude wooden saber in his hand seemed as sharp as a real blade. Shen Jue's strikes were fierce and unrelenting, piercing and cold; frost seemed to bloom everywhere his blade passed. The wind picked up, scattering leaves in every direction. Just as Shen Jue was about to deliver a final downward slash, Consort Gao suddenly pushed Xiahou Lian into the blade's path.

Xiahou Lian jolted in shock. The draft produced by the blow quickly engulfed his entire body; he could almost smell blood on Shen Jue's "blade."

Shen Jue hesitated for a moment, and Xiahou Lian seized the opportunity to sidestep so that the blade only grazed the edge of his robe. Shen Jue shot Consort Gao a cold glance.

She clapped her hands gleefully. "How fun! Come on, you two. Fight!"

Before Xiahou Lian could scold the consort, Shen Jue's saber turned and came straight for his face.

Shen Jue had only learned five of the moves comprising Qiye Garden's saber arts. Now he used the third move—Swallow's Swoop.

This kid just started learning and already wants to spar? Xiahou Lian leaned back to evade the Swallow's Swoop, then did a backflip, avoiding a second strike. He didn't counterattack, simply dodged left and right. Shen Jue was still a novice, and the disparity in the boys' skills was vast. Yet somehow, in just five moves, Shen Jue had woven together a sequence of full-fledged attacks. Within a few minutes, his saber strikes had already proved relentless, never letting up nor flagging. Although Xiahou Lian dodged them effortlessly, he was still astonished.

This, after learning just five moves!

Both boys soon found themselves exhausted. They leaned against the wall, panting. Xiahou Lian patted Shen Jue's shoulder. "Shaoye, you're a damn martial arts prodigy!" he sighed.

"You're just too slow."

"Earlier, you said that my moves differed from what I'd described. What'd you mean?"

Shen Jue looked at him with a complex expression. "Well, your saber lacks killing intent."

Xiahou Lian, stunned, recalled what the old spy in the Xie household had once said to him: *"You may have the bodhi saber, but you lack the heart for murder."* At the time, Xiahou Lian had been indignant, but now he had to admit that it was true.

He hated killing, and not due to fear or incompetence—he simply despised it. Since taking up the assassin's mantle, he'd completed only two missions. As the Garuda's son, he was treated differently from other novice assassins: A senior oversaw each of his missions to ensure that he didn't get himself killed. Yet on each mission, Xiahou Lian messed up—either by missing the crucial strike or by giving himself away, forcing his senior to finish the job.

The rumor that the Garuda's son was a hopeless failure had spread through Qiye Garden. To the other assassins, his eventual death on the battlefield seemed inevitable. A tombstone would soon stand in the valley behind the Garden temple, and it would bear Xiahou Lian's name.

But he couldn't let Shen Jue know that he was a failure. Even if his pride was baseless, it was still pride. He feigned nonchalance and replied, "That's because I'm not killing anyone right now, just demonstrating the moves for you. Of course there's no killing intent." Then he boasted shamelessly, "You have no idea how skilled I am. The saber Jingtie is already causing a stir in the jianghu. In a few years, my blade will surpass even my mother's Hengbo."

Shen Jue, of course, didn't buy it. Xiahou Lian had a habit of stretching the truth. Back in the Xie household, he'd boasted about his high status, insisting that all the assassins were at his beck and call, only to end up getting whipped.

Yet Shen Jue didn’t have the heart to call him out. “Enough boasting,” he said simply. “Keep teaching.”

“Qiye Garden’s saber arts encompass many styles,” Xiahou Lian said with a flourish. “Single-handed and double-handed, using long, short, or curved sabers. They also include assassination techniques and slashing techniques. Assassination techniques are ruthless and cunning—perfect for one-on-one combat but useless against a group. I heard that the Garden’s former abbot was a master of assassination. No one could protect the targets he pursued. In the end, though, he was ambushed by ten men and died. He killed their leader, but the remaining nine hacked him to pieces.”

“So slashing techniques can handle multiple opponents?”

“Mm-hmm.” Xiahou Lian nodded. “They incorporate a number of border-army styles. They’re perfect for the battlefield. But assassins don’t fight on battlefields, so many don’t bother learning those.”

“Which do you know?”

Xiahou Lian’s face colored with embarrassment—a rare sight. “Well, I wanted to follow in my mother’s footsteps. She mastered both single- and double-handed blades, and both assassination and slashing techniques too. But this stuff really requires talent. I’m not quite at her level yet. I’ve almost mastered single-handed straight blades, and I’m halfway through the double-handed ones. My instructor only knows assassination techniques, though, so that’s all I know too...”

As a teacher, Xiahou Lian was evidently a bit lacking, but he was Shen Jue’s only option. “Teach me what you’re best at,” Shen Jue said.

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THE CLOUDS DRIFTED lazily as rain came and went. The leaves grew lush and thick, and the hum of cicadas filled the courtyard. Every night beneath the moonlit sky, Shen Jue practiced with his saber, accompanied by the cicadas’ song. His eyes were eerily calm, and though the wind whipped his robes, his gaze remained level, the wooden saber in

his hand steady as a mountain. The wind gradually seemed to fade, the cicadas to grow quiet, and even the moonlight dimmed. In the silent darkness, only the crude wooden saber remained.

Shen Jue drew the saber from beneath his arm, then brandished it upward in a slanting arc.

This was the Swallow's Swoop saber art of Qiye Garden.

Shen Jue had practiced this move over a thousand times. The cunning, ruthless Swallow's Swoop could slit a throat or gut an opponent. With enough speed, it would cause blood to spray instantly.

The wooden blade struck Xiahou Lian. *Thwack.*

Xiahou Lian yelped and rolled on the ground. That was the seventh hit he'd taken that night.

He thought Shen Jue was a madman. Since beginning his lessons, the boy had practiced four hours each night without fail, rain or shine. He didn't stop at practicing alone—he insisted on dragging Xiahou Lian into it, demanding that they spar. Xiahou Lian almost felt as if he'd been transported back to the Xie household, where he'd had to sit with Xie Jinglan while the boy studied. In the library, Xiahou Lian had dozed while Xie Jinglan sat engrossed in his books, their only company a dim lamp and the howling wind outside. At least back then, Xiahou Lian could entertain himself by catching moths and centipedes or idly plucking flowers and grass. Now he had to leap and dodge endlessly to avoid Shen Jue's relentless attacks.

Drenched in sweat, Xiahou Lian lay on the ground, exhausted and unwilling to get up.

Shen Jue kicked him gently a few times, his face expressionless. "If you don't get up, I'll hit you again."

Xiahou Lian was exasperated. "Man, aren't you tired?!"

"I am," Shen Jue said, poking Xiahou Lian's stomach with the wooden saber. "But I have to keep practicing. I'm not like you. You started training in childhood; your body was flexible, and you progressed quickly. My body is stiff now, so I have to work twice as hard."

But Xiahou Lian stayed put, lying on the ground like a dead fish.

Shen Jue sighed. As he tried to think of a way to get his useless sparring partner back on his feet, someone suddenly struck him on the head.

Consort Gao had appeared from out of nowhere, clapping her hands. “I want to play too! I want to play too!”

“Yes, yes. Go spar with her. Lunatics have energy to burn!” With that, Xiahou Lian scrambled to his feet and bolted toward the house, terrified that Shen Jue would chase him.

Shen Jue had the distinct feeling that Xiahou Lian’s comment wasn’t aimed exclusively at Consort Gao.

He turned to look at the consort. Her hair was the usual nest tangled with chicken feathers, her dress stained and dirty. She looked like a walking feather duster. Sighing, Shen Jue shifted into his starting stance and swung his wooden saber. Consort Gao didn’t react in time, and half the feathers in her hair went flying, scattering across the ground in a flurry.

Looking at the feathers on the ground, Shen Jue suddenly lost interest. “Forget it… I’m done.”

“You brat! How dare you knock off my general’s plume?! Watch how this mighty general will teach you a lesson!” Furious, Consort Gao broke off a branch and struck Shen Jue on the head.

While he was still dazed from her first strike, Consort Gao’s branch descended like a storm, the blows landing as densely as summer rain on water. He raised his wooden saber to block her, but in his panic, he could only deflect a few strikes. The rest landed on his body, every blow burning.

How is this madwoman so fast?! If Xiahou Lian embodied the springtime’s gentle breeze and drizzle, Consort Gao was like a bucket of dirty water dumped over Shen Jue’s head by a furious god!

Finally abandoning his pride, Shen Jue fled.

The next morning, Xiahou Lian woke to find a jar of wound ointment left open on the table. Shen Jue was still asleep on the heated bed, his pale face unusually peaceful.

He must’ve been truly exhausted if he’d neglected to put away the ointment. After all, Shen Jue was notoriously meticulous—failing to do something as small as hanging garments on the rack would earn Xiahou

Lian a stern lecture. “Shen-da-xiaojie,” Xiahou Lian had grumbled to himself, more times than he could count.

Shen Jue was strict with others and even stricter with himself. When he set his mind to something, he pushed himself to the brink, refusing to stop until he was utterly drained. Xiahou Lian, meanwhile, had always been carefree. He had no idea how he got along with Shen Jue; that was a mystery even to him.

After getting ready, Xiahou Lian went to the kitchen to fetch everyone’s breakfast. As he went through the Shunzhen Gate, he saw an old, wrinkled eunuch standing by the gatepost and smiling at him.

“Sixi, are you better now? You look much stronger. I’ve been run off my feet these past few days, but I finally found time to come see you, so don’t blame me for not having visited!” The old eunuch walked over, carrying a box of food. “This is from your uncle in the south: osmanthus cakes, sesame candies, and square pastries. I don’t like sweets, but you’re still a child, so I thought I’d bring them to you to enjoy.”

So this was Sixi’s godfather. Xiahou Lian’s heart raced. He wondered how to address the man; luckily, the eunuch had introduced himself, saving Xiahou Lian from a potential slip. With a quick bow, he said smoothly, “Thank you for remembering me, Godfather. Your godson has been to the underworld and back. The King of Hell said that I still needed to live in order to serve you, so he returned me here. Please, come inside. You’ll catch cold standing in the wind.”

“No, no.” The old eunuch chuckled and waved his hand. “This morning, foreigners gave His Majesty a Ferghana horse. I have to go back and ensure the little ones groom the beast properly.” He paused meaningfully, his droopy eyes regarding Xiahou Lian. “His Majesty is in high spirits after receiving the horse and plans to go hunting on the fifteenth. Coincidentally, Cao Ling—who oversees the imperial stables—is sick, and it doesn’t look as though he’ll recover soon. Would you like to take his place at the hunt?” Smiling slyly, he added, “You’ve always wanted to leave the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard, haven’t you? Plenty of important figures will join that hunt. If you make a good impression, you might secure a better future.”

Xiahou Lian—a fake eunuch—had no business getting involved in this. He was about to decline when Shen Jue's voice rang out from behind: "Yan-gonggong, Sixi just recovered from a serious illness. He isn't at his best. If he went to serve at the hunt and upset a noble somehow, it would be a disaster. Why not let me take his place? What do you think?"

Yan-gonggong looked Xiahou Lian up and down. "Sixi looks quite well to me. Even stronger than before."

Shen Jue shot Xiahou Lian a glance, and Xiahou Lian immediately clutched his chest, letting out a groan. "You don't understand, Godfather. This is what they call 'false strength.' I don't have any serious symptoms, but I'm constantly bothered by minor ones. Now my chest hurts too. I'm afraid I'm not yet fit to serve. Why not let Shen-gonggong go instead? He's a good friend of mine—it's all the same."

Yan-gonggong sighed. "Fine. If you lack the ambition, so be it. Shen Jue, come tomorrow, and I'll show you around the imperial stables."

Shen Jue bowed his head obediently. "Yes, Yan-gonggong."

With a displeased flick of his sleeves, Sixi's godfather left. With his eyes on Yan-gonggong's hunched back, Xiahou Lian muttered suspiciously, "As they say, 'Beware of those who visit for no reason.' He didn't come when 'Sixi' was sick, but he shows up now that he's better? Bastard must be up to no good."

"It's fine. As long as I see Wei De at the hunt, this'll be worthwhile." Shen Jue brushed nonexistent dust off his sleeves and walked inside.

Xiahou Lian was horrified. Did this madman plan to assassinate Wei De *during* the hunt?!

Chapter 27:
The Blizzard Saber

ON A TRAINING GROUND in the outskirts of the capital, at Shili Slope, two soldiers sparred. Both wielding long, narrow goose-quill sabers, they exchanged dozens of blows. Their blades flashed like swirling snow, dazzling the eye. The crowd surrounding them cheered now and then.

Situ Jin was busy cleaning the weapons on a rack. From time to time, though, he glanced at the ongoing match.

On his second day there, he'd received a harsh welcome. The troops of this military camp were nothing like the ranks of the imperial guard, which selected officers who did well in rigorous martial exams or came from prestigious families. The soldiers here at the camp, meanwhile, were a mixed bag—many used to be ruffians or even beggars. The veterans inevitably subjected the new recruits to hazing, forcing them to fetch tea and empty chamber pots. To escape, a recruit had to pledge allegiance to a senior and serve as their lackey. By their second year, these recruits became veterans themselves, and they could bully the newest recruits in turn.

That tradition had been passed down through the generations. The soldiers might have excelled in little else, but they'd perfected the art of hazing.

Situ Jin was relatively lucky. His aloof demeanor made the veterans hesitate to mess with him, so they instead assigned him the task of cleaning weapons. Situ Jin enjoyed that duty. He had few friends; weapons were his closest companions. He found it easier to get along with swords and spears than with people.

The two combatants were locked in battle. When Situ Jin finished cleaning the last spear, he stood on the periphery of the match to watch. The long-faced man was clearly winning, his relentless slashes nearly pushing his opponent off the platform. His sword techniques were simple—some might have called them bold, while others might've said that they relied purely on brute strength. The man swung his slender goose-quill saber as if

it were a heavy hammer. Each blow struck his opponent's blade with such force that both weapons shrieked from the strain.

Situ Jin shook his head. The man clearly didn't understand the essence of the saber.

As the long-faced soldier delivered another overhead strike, his opponent spun away with a tap of his toes. The long-faced soldier twisted to follow up with a sweeping slash, his blade gleaming like snow.

"Wrong," Situ Jin sighed softly.

"Oh? What's wrong?" asked someone nearby.

"He's using his saber like a hammer—he doesn't understand the weapon," Situ Jin replied calmly.

Sure enough, before Situ Jin had finished his sentence, the long-faced soldier cried out in pain. His opponent had slammed the flat of his blade against the man's ankle. The tide of the battle turned instantly—the struck man staggered and tumbled right off the platform. The crowd burst into applause, but Situ Jin simply turned and walked away.

"Wait," called the man who had questioned Situ Jin. "You seem quite knowledgeable about saber techniques, comrade. You must be quite skilled."

Situ Jin's deliberate mind finally picked up on the tone underlying the words. He turned and looked suspiciously at the man.

The long-faced soldier who'd just been defeated walked up behind the man who'd questioned Situ Jin. "Dage," he muttered.

The man smiled, but his expression was unkind. "My brother and I have been studying the saber since we were five. We learned from our father. We practice the Twelve Forms of the Blizzard Saber, the strongest saber style in the north. No one has ever accused us of not understanding the saber. My brother is still young, and his skills are unrefined. As for me, I don't claim to be unmatched, but even the Garuda of Qiye Garden would think twice before facing my blade. Tell me, comrade, what makes *you* so special?"

Situ Jin took a moment.

The Twelve Forms of the Blizzard Saber was the north's most ubiquitous style. Almost everyone knew a few of its moves: for instance, "Flying Goose Marks the Snow," or "Whirling Wind and Churning Snow." But nine out of ten such manuals circulating on the streets were fake, so Situ Jin had never bothered with them. Instead, he'd simply followed the wandering swordsmen who passed through his small town, learning whatever moves they taught him.

He didn't even know the techniques' names, but he'd practiced each day against wooden stakes until he'd ingrained the nameless moves into his bones. The moment he'd first gripped the hilt of a saber, he'd known how to swing it.

Not until he'd encountered the Garuda in the palace had he understood that he'd been practicing Blizzard Saber techniques. The Garuda, who'd once assassinated a master of the Blizzard Saber, had recognized the moves. If she said they were Blizzard Saber techniques, then they must've been.

Situ Jin remembered an impoverished town in the north. Amid heavy snow falling like a curtain, a downtrodden swordsman had stood, delivering a breathtakingly beautiful strike. A true Blizzard Saber technique could cut through even a snowstorm.

In truth, Situ Jin wanted to tell the man, "If you ever faced the Garuda, eight lives wouldn't be enough to save you." But he was naturally reserved and said simply, "I only said that your brother doesn't understand. I didn't say that *you* don't."

The man snorted. "In that case, why don't we spar? I'd like to see for myself whether I understand the saber!"

"What do I care whether you understand it or not?" Situ Jin said, finally growing impatient. "I still have weapons to clean. I'm busy."

"Give him a blade!" the man roared. His wide, bulging eyes resembled copper bells, and his voice brimmed with rage.

Someone tossed Situ Jin a goose-quill saber, and he caught it reluctantly. The other man drew his blade, glaring fiercely at him.

Bored people often did pointless things, and Situ Jin had no choice but to indulge this one. He calculated how many moves it would take to

defeat the man, ensuring that it wouldn't delay his cleaning duties, then drew his saber. He held the hilt in a reverse grip, the blade hidden behind his elbow.

The crowd laughed. How could anyone fight with a reverse grip?

The man chuckled. "Who taught you that move, a butcher?"

Situ Jin looked at him but didn't respond. His gaze was as cold and indifferent as if he were looking at an insignificant speck of dust.

That single glance made the man's blood boil. Roaring, he raised his saber in both hands and charged at Situ Jin.

Situ Jin didn't move. Not even widening his eyes, he maintained his reverse grip. The man's powerful strike was inches away; the saber descended like a thousand-pound hammer invested with the forces of wind and thunder. Situ Jin moved to the side, then quickly stepped forward. The two men met for only a brief second before parting again, their backs turned to one another.

The match was over.

The crowd had only seen the man's mountain-splitting strike. No one had noticed the clear arc of Situ Jin's blade—except the man who felt it. He gasped for breath, reaching down to touch his waist. A long gash now split his robe, revealing his bronze skin.

The crowd fell silent. Expressionless, Situ Jin sheathed his saber. "I concede," he said softly.

The man's face turned red, then pale. Being bested in a single move was humiliating; he would never live this down in the camp. Suddenly, there was a burst of clapping. A man in armor entered, applauding and laughing. "Young but already so skilled! Impressive."

The crowd saluted. "Greetings, Commander Lu."

Commander Lu looked at Situ Jin. "What's your name?"

"Situ Jin."

"Ah. It's you." Commander Lu nodded. "You were the martial arts champion in the eighteenth year of Xuanhe. I've heard of you."

The crowd gasped, But the man who'd challenged Situ Jin sneered inwardly. If this was a martial arts champion, why was he serving in the camp as a lowly soldier? He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't realize that question insulted him as well.

"I heard that you were demoted," Commander Lu continued. "Don't be discouraged, young man. You have a long road ahead; temporary demotion is insignificant. You can still achieve great things in the Five Armies Camp. Right, everyone?"

The crowd roared in agreement.

"Speaking of potential achievements, an opportunity has just come up! The emperor is going deer hunting in the Western Hills this afternoon. I'm here to select some men to accompany the nobles on their hunt. This is a chance for a promotion! Who wants to volunteer?"

The soldiers exchanged glances and took a step back.

Commander Lu's words sounded wonderful, but everyone knew the reality. "Accompanying the nobles on their hunt" would actually mean hiding in the woods until the princes and nobles spotted a target, then shooting it themselves. Eunuchs would then present the prey to the hunting party as if the nobles had shot it. If a noble of decent skill *did* happen to hit their target, the eunuchs would discreetly remove the soldier's arrow, leaving only the noble's.

Simply hiding in the woods and shooting a few deer wasn't so bad, but some of the nobles had awful aim; that was where the danger lay. Arrows could fly anywhere. Two years previously, an unlucky soldier from the Three Thousand Camp had been struck by an arrow from some duke or imperial relative. He'd been killed on the spot. The court paid out some silver in compensation, but that was little comfort to the soldier's family, who'd depended on his meager salary. Following his death, the family's children and elderly had no choice but to throw themselves into a river.

The man who'd challenged Situ Jin had a sly idea. He pointed at Situ Jin. "I'll suggest a candidate! Situ Jin is not just a skilled martial artist but also an excellent archer. Why not send him?"

Commander Lu smiled. "I was thinking the same thing." He turned to Situ Jin. "Go get ready, and report to me later."

Situ Jin bowed his head in acknowledgment.

The man walked up to him and smirked. “You may understand the saber, but let’s see if you understand the bow—or if the bow understands you. Ha ha ha!”

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DEEP IN THE FOREST, the wind rose.

The forest was like an ocean, its waves of leaves surging in the wind. The rustling of leaves and endless chirping of cicadas filled the air. Sunlight filtered through gaps in the foliage, scattering golden dust that danced in the air.

Situ Jin sat astride his horse, a longbow slung across his back, and watched the group ahead. He and several other archers were scattered throughout the woods, ready to shoot any prey the nobles targeted.

At the head of the pack, the eldest prince rode a chestnut-colored Ferghana horse—a recent tribute from abroad. The prince had bravely tamed the horse in front of Fengtian Hall, earning the emperor’s favor and the horse as a reward. Beside him was Wei De, head of the Directorate of Ceremonial, wearing a Tatar hat and a narrow-sleeved robe patterned with clouds. A red-lacquered sharkskin scabbard hung at his waist, and his horse carried a quiver of arrows. A group of agents followed behind him, each wearing a black gauze hat and round-collared robe.

Wei De didn’t seem to be a skilled rider. A young eunuch in green led his horse at a slow pace. Situ Jin watched that young eunuch. He kept his head down, his every movement exuding obedience. His slender frame and thin shoulders looked familiar.

Behind him, an archer whispered, “Look at Wei De’s entourage and attire. If you didn’t already know, would you even realize he was a eunuch? He looks every bit a noble, even standing beside the prince.”

“Exactly. You could say he’s half a master. It’s a strange world we live in, where castrated men outshine those who are whole. Maybe we

should *all* cut ours off," another archer joked.

Wei De had risen from humble beginnings. Originally a self-castrated nobody, he'd been on his way to serve out exile in the army when he encountered the late emperor's procession. Before the imperial carriage could pass, Wei De had rushed out of the line of prisoners and prostrated himself, refusing to rise even when the guards whipped him. Moved by pity, the late emperor took Wei De into the palace and assigned him to serve the third prince, who would later become the Xuanhe Emperor. The prince had lost his mother at birth and was disdained by everyone. His brothers routinely beat him, and his clumsiness earned him frequent canings from his tutors. Each time, he returned to his chambers with palms that were red and swollen.

Only Wei De cared for the prince, and with unwavering devotion. Although Wei De couldn't fight back when the other princes beat the boy, he shielded the prince with his own body, enduring their kicks and comforting him. When the prince's palms hurt too badly for him to sleep, Wei De blew on them over and over to soothe the pain. When no one would play with the prince, Wei De let him ride on his back or played fetch like a dog.

The Gao family had always struggled to produce heirs. Their ancestors had filled their harems, prayed to all manner of Buddhas and deities, and even tried alchemy, but to no avail. Fortunately, despite the family's limited descendants, the Great Qi dynasty had survived over a dozen generations. By the time of the Xuanhe Emperor, there were three sons and one daughter—more heirs than usual. However, the first two princes killed each other in a struggle for the throne, leaving the Xuanhe Emperor's crown to fall like a bolt from the blue onto the third prince's head.

This sudden rise overwhelmed the new emperor, and his true nature —once stifled by his brothers—burst forth. He began indulging his every whim—building leopard enclosures, touring the south, choosing beautiful women—everything but governing. Thus, the power to approve memorials fell into Wei De's hands.

The Eastern Depot flourished, the prisons overflowed, and the eunuch faction's authority grew dramatically, leaving the officials outside it

in constant fear. The emperor focused on his pleasure while Wei De wielded absolute power. Even the highest-ranking officials had to bow respectfully to the eunuch.

No one could speak of these things, only sigh inwardly. Eastern Depot spies were everywhere; they could even have retrieved the game tiles officials played with at home. If Wei De heard anyone gossip about him, there would be hell to pay.

Situ Jin remained silent, his eyes fixed on Wei De's black horse. He frowned slightly.

Was it just his imagination, or was the horse limping?

Up ahead, the eldest prince laughed heartily and cracked his whip, urging his horse into a gallop. Waving off the young eunuch, who stepped aside, Wei De raised his own whip to follow.

Suddenly, disaster struck.

After just a few strides, the black horse let out a long whinny, and its front legs buckled. The horse collapsed to the side, catching Wei De off guard. He struggled to maintain his balance but then fell from the saddle.

Everyone was horrified, but the other eunuchs were too far away to help. They could only watch as Wei De—fragile as dry grass—tumbled to the ground. Only the young eunuch in green reacted. He shot forth like an arrow, reaching Wei De just in time to cushion his fall. Wei De was in his seventies and would've been seriously injured—if not killed—by the impact of a fall from a tall horse. But the young eunuch's thin frame, bony as it was, provided enough of a cushion. The two eunuchs fell to the ground together, and Wei De cried out in pain as his Tatar hat rolled away, spinning in circles.

As the young eunuch fell, Situ Jin glimpsed his face—the cold eyes and tightly pressed lips. It was Shen Jue, whom he'd met once before.

As Shen Jue held Wei De, shielding him, the young eunuch's arm slammed into a sharp rock. Blood immediately soaked half his sleeve, but he didn't make a sound at the searing pain. Slowly, he sat up and helped Wei De to his feet as well.

Wei De was still shaken, his hair disheveled. He gasped, winded, as he examined the fallen horse. “Someone tried to kill me! Someone tried to kill me!” He clutched his chest, then—finally catching his breath—pointed at Shen Jue. “You—what’s your name? Who was in charge of feeding this horse? Someone call that useless Yan Ang over here now!”

Shen Jue knelt and pressed his head to the ground. “This servant is Shen Jue from the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard. The horse was under the care of the stablemaster, Cao-gonggong from the imperial stables. A few days ago, Yan-gonggong said that Stablemaster Cao was ill and asked me to take over. I…I never expected today’s mishap. Please forgive me, Wei-gonggong!”

With these words, Shen Jue had neatly absolved himself of blame. His head remained bowed, hiding the dark shadows in his eyes.

“Why would Yan Ang involve you in the imperial stables’ affairs?” Wei De’s eyes bulged with rage. “I’m not even dead yet, and that Yan Ang is already plotting against me!”

Hearing the commotion, the eldest prince turned his horse around. “What’s going on?”

Suddenly, an arrow shot from one side and struck the Ferghana horse’s hindquarters. Blood gushed out, and the horse jolted in pain, then bolted straight toward Shen Jue and Wei De. The horrified prince yanked the reins, but the horse charged straight ahead, out of control. “Move!” he shouted. “Get out of the way!”

The horse’s hooves thundered against the ground, kicking up swirling dust clouds. Shen Jue and Wei De, too close to escape, felt the ground shake beneath them. Shen Jue’s pupils contracted as Wei De went pale, watching the iron-gray hooves approach rapidly. In that instant, Wei De’s mind raced. His clawlike hand gripped Shen Jue’s arm, and as their eyes met, Wei De pulled Shen Jue in front of him.

He meant to use Shen Jue as a human shield!

Wei De’s eyes, murky as deep pools, reflected Shen Jue’s pale face. Shen Jue had no time to struggle—the hooves were already nearly upon them!

Chapter 28:
A Gathering Storm

SUDDENLY, a cold, gleaming arrow shot through the air, passing over Shen Jue's head to pierce the skull of the blood-sweating horse.

With a whinny, the horse collapsed to its knees, its massive body sliding across the ground and stopping just short of Shen Jue and Wei De. The mud and dust stirred by the falling horse covered them both, and the eldest prince was thrown from the horse. He screamed as he hit the ground hard.

Shen Jue turned his head to see a cold-faced young man in the distance, still holding his longbow.

The prince was bleeding profusely from the head, dazed and disoriented. The pain in his leg hit him belatedly, quickly overwhelming his senses.

"It hurts... It hurts...!"

Panicking eunuchs crowded around. Wei De pushed through the throng, shouting for the imperial physicians as he checked the prince's injuries. Several eunuchs pulled Situ Jin roughly off his horse and dragged him before Wei De.

"Wei-gonggong… This man shot the prince's horse to save you, but he caused the prince to fall. What should we do with him?"

Shen Jue pressed his lips together, crawled forward a few steps, and pressed his head to the ground. "Captain Situ acted out of necessity to save lives. Please show mercy, Wei-gonggong."

Situ Jin knelt calmly on the ground, as if the impending disaster had nothing to do with him.

"Nonsense!" Wei De barked. "How can my worthless life compare to His Highness's precious health and body? If sacrificing my life could ensure His Highness's safety, I would do so without hesitation! As a

captain, this man confused his priorities, and he deserves punishment! Take him to the imperial prison and await His Majesty's judgment!"

Shen Jue clenched his teeth and said nothing more. However much he might argue, his words carried no weight. He was nothing but an ant struggling to protect himself. How could he save someone who'd caused the prince to fall and break his leg—even if that person had saved him?

Shen Jue's silence caught Wei De's attention. At the young eunuch's age, many boys were hot-blooded, spouting useless platitudes about brotherhood and repaying favors, only to overestimate themselves and rush to their dooms like moths to a flame. Others were timid, short on courage, and forever hiding from trouble. That especially held true of those who'd witnessed the darkness of the palace and been scared so witless that they could barely string a sentence together.

This boy had the courage to speak up for his benefactor, showing his gratitude. Yet he hadn't pushed, proving that he knew his place. Feeling a spark of interest, Wei De helped Shen Jue stand. "What did you say your name was?"

His opportunity had come. Suppressing his racing heart, Shen Jue replied, "This servant is Shen Jue. He serves in the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard."

"Shen Jue. That's a good name. Who gave it to you?" Wei De asked, unusually amiable.

"My mother," Shen Jue lied without batting an eye. "She was partially educated."

Educated women were either the daughters of noble families or courtesans. Most eunuchs came from humble backgrounds, which was how they'd ended up in such a line of work. Understanding Shen Jue's implication, Wei De asked, "Can you read?"

"A little," Shen Jue answered cautiously, unsure of Wei De's intentions.

"Good. Very good. You may go now. Rest well."

The eunuchs carried the prince away on a stretcher. Several imperial physicians had finally arrived to the scene, and they followed the prince

now, frantically wiping sweat from their brows. These days, serving as an imperial physician was as dangerous as being an assassin. One mistake and they would bear the brunt of the emperor's wrath, facing ominous questions like "What use are you?" and threats such as "If you can't cure him, you'll join him in the grave!" This prince was the emperor's only surviving son; if anything happened to him, the physicians would all lose their heads.

Wei De composed himself and hurried after them.

Shen Jue had planned to follow, and the words he'd prepared earlier rose in his throat, but a deep sense of shame stifled them. His mind was in turmoil, his fists clenched. He opened his mouth but ultimately stayed quiet.

After all, he was only fourteen. The pride in his bones was inextinguishable, even if he bent his back in submission. Only those who'd crawled out of the mud, and believed themselves destined for a lowly life, could smile without reservation while kneeling. Such things were far beyond Shen Jue. Even if he suppressed his pride, he couldn't bring himself to force a sycophantic smile.

Shen Jue returned to the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard in low spirits. At a distance, he saw Xiahou Lian sitting on the threshold of the Shunzhen Gate, craning his neck to look out. Without registering it, Shen Jue felt a warmth in his chest, like a comforting hot coal.

When Xiahou Lian saw Shen Jue, his eyes lit up, and he hurried over. But as he noticed Shen Jue's bloodstained sleeve, he exclaimed in alarm, "I thought you said you weren't going to... You know! What happened?"

Shen Jue had almost forgotten his injury. He glanced at it indifferently and said, "It's nothing. Just a scratch." Then he shot Xiahou Lian a look. "Do you think I can perform miracles? How could I take someone's head in broad daylight?"

Relieved that Shen Jue hadn't done anything too reckless, Xiahou Lian dragged him back to their room. He fetched bandages and medicine, peppering Shen Jue with questions. "So what'd you do? Did you see Wei De? What does he look like?"

"Like an ordinary person," Shen Jue replied without looking up.

Xiahou Lian glanced at him and noticed his somber expression. He figured Shen Jue was upset about seeing the man who'd slaughtered his

family while being unable to exact his revenge. “Don’t worry, Shaoye,” he said softly. “You’ll have your chance to deal with that scoundrel.” Then, as if remembering something, he added excitedly, “By the way, there actually *is* a way to take someone’s head in broad daylight. Have you heard of Qianji Thread?”

“No,” said Shen Jue, with a sidelong glance. “The only thing I’ve heard of that can kill someone in a crowd is Zhang Liang’s[18] giant hammer.”

“What’s that?” Xiahou Lian asked, putting his ignorance on full display. “Anyway, I’m talking about a weapon Qiye Garden assassins used three generations ago. It’s as thin as silk, but it can slice through hair or even metal. It’s so fine that it’s invisible unless you have sharp eyes. You can walk through it and feel nothing. Then, a few steps later, you look down and realize you’ve been cut in half.”

Shen Jue was skeptical. Even the sharpest blade couldn’t slice cleanly through a human body; it took several chops just to kill a pig. “Then why don’t you use it now?” he asked doubtfully.

“It’s too hard to make. Qianji Thread was passed down for three generations, but throughout that time, only the Garuda could craft it. It isn’t just hard to produce, it’s hard to control. You can handle one thread, and it’s possible to set up a preplanned web. But if you want to use an array, or to alter the web to trap an enemy, that’s really difficult. Moving a single thread affects the whole web. To master the arrays, you need to study *The Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art* and memorize all the web variations. But you know us assassins—we don’t have the patience for math. It’s a miracle if we’re just able to finish the *Three Character Classic*.”

Xiahou Lian didn’t mention that Uncle Duan still couldn’t write his own name perfectly.

“Why could they use Qianji Thread before, then?” Shen Jue scoffed. “Each generation must be less capable than the last.”

“The three generations of the Garuda who could craft it were all from the Ban family, said to be descendants of the Gongshu school of mechanics. After that third generation, the family died out, so it makes sense that we lost the technique.”

“But don’t you want to recreate it? Then maybe you could kill the abbot and take control of Qiye Garden yourself.” Shen Jue glanced at his bandaged arm and sighed. “It’s just a small wound, Xiahou Lian. Why bother bandaging it?”

“Your skin’s so delicate. There’s no way I could be careless.” Xiahou Lian cut the bandage and tied it with a neat knot. “Being abbot isn’t all that great. You have to shave your head, and you can never marry. That’d just be miserable. I don’t share your lofty ambitions. Besides, I’m following you now. Once you’re head of the Eastern Depot, just find me a beautiful wife, and I’ll be satisfied.”

Shen Jue had to admit defeat. It was a good thing that Xiahou Lian hadn’t been born into a wealthy family. Otherwise, he’d have been a complete good-for-nothing who indulged in all the vices: drinking, gambling, whoring, laziness, gluttony, and scheming. But Xiahou Lian now safely resided in the palace, so once Shen Jue gained power, he could give Xiahou Lian any woman he wanted—as long as it wasn’t a palace concubine or princess.

Shen Jue had already resigned himself to a life as a eunuch. Children were like flowers in a mirror or the moon’s reflection in water—something he could never touch, nor even think of reaching for. If Xiahou Lian started a family and sired many sons, Shen Jue could pick the smartest to take care of him in his old age.

As he considered that, Shen Jue felt a sudden pang of sadness. If Xiahou Lian had a new family, what would become of Shen Jue? What was he to Xiahou Lian? On moonlit Mid-Autumn Festival nights, Xiahou Lian would worship the moon and eat mooncakes with his wife and children, leaving the lonely bachelor Shen Jue feeling out of place. Shen Jue reproached himself bitterly. He felt as if he were scraping a file against his heart, the pain dull but persistent. How could he let that happen?!

Shen Jue looked up suddenly and glared daggers at Xiahou Lian. “You wish!”

His hostile look baffled Xiahou Lian. Shen Jue’s temper was as unpredictable as a summer storm, striking without warning. Xiahou Lian had suffered it for ages, but he still couldn’t see the pattern to Shen Jue’s anger. “What’d I do now?” he asked bluntly.

Shen Jue didn’t answer, just looked at Xiahou Lian resentfully.

“What’d I do? Tell me!” Xiahou Lian demanded.

What could Shen Jue say? Should he ask Xiahou Lian to stay with him forever and never marry or have children? Xiahou Lian agreeing to stay in the palace had been a huge favor to Shen Jue already. Turning his face away, Shen Jue pushed the lattice window open to look outside. The sky had darkened, and a few stars dangled in the heavens as if they might fall at any moment.

Xiahou Lian gave up. If Shen Jue didn’t want to talk, fine. Did he think that Xiahou Lian enjoyed serving him? Xiahou Lian silently packed the scissors and bandages away, only to see Shen Jue pick up his wooden saber and head outside.

Xiahou Lian grabbed the saber. “Are you crazy? Do you want to lose your arm?”

Shen Jue frowned. “It’s not even a serious injury. Just a scratch. Why are you making a mountain out of a molehill?”

Damn it. Now I’m the one being overly cautious. Xiahou Lian steamed with rage—but then decided to let Shen Jue torture himself if he wanted to. *Why am I always babying him, anyway? I’ll end up spoiling him rotten!*

No—I already have!

Noticing Jingtie on the bed, Xiahou Lian figured he might as well go for broke. “Fine. You want to practice? Today, I’ll let you use a real saber. Let’s see what you can do.”

They went outside. The night was as cool as water, and fireflies flitted among the trees, resembling stars. The wind rustled the leaves, the sound like gentle whispers. Xiahou Lian wasn’t wearing his mask, and though shadows hid half his keen, youthful face, his eyes sparkled with starlight. Shen Jue looked at him for a moment, then averted his gaze.

Xiahou Lian drew Jingtie and handed the saber to Shen Jue. “Use the blade’s dull side against me.”

Lit by the moon, Jingtie lay quietly in Xiahou Lian’s hand, its dark surface absorbing all luminosity.

Legendary swords often came with stories: A blacksmith sacrificing themselves to forge a blade destined to drink blood, each wielder meeting a tragic end. A demon blade that had already claimed 8,676 lives and needed 9,999 to become invincible, capable of slaying gods and Buddhas.

But those were usually just tall tales spun by craftsmen to sell their wares. How could such things be real? Even the stories of Gan Jiang and Mo Ye[19] might not be true.

There were no such legends about Jingtie. It had been forged in the Garden; Xiahou Lian was its first master. The blade had no past, and its future was unknown.

Shen Jue gripped Jingtie's hilt, and in that moment, he felt the blade's frantic, hidden heartbeat.

"A blade is an assassin's lifeline, and the Garden only issues one per lifetime. So you'd better hold on to my lifeline tightly; if you drop it, I'll be furious."

Shen Jue didn't reply.

"Before you swing the blade," Xiahou Lian continued, "you must familiarize yourself with it until it feels like part of your body. Look closely. Jingtie's edge isn't sharp enough to cut hair, but it can pierce armor. It's a battlefield weapon."

"Why use a battlefield weapon for assassination?"

Xiahou Lian sighed softly. "If it can pierce armor, it can shatter bones. The abbot said I wasn't ruthless enough, so a rougher blade suited me. Now, shattering an opponent's spine isn't too bad. They suffocate and die. But the skull is different. A person won't die immediately of a shattered skull. They might even become an idiot and suffer migraines before finally dying. Compassionate butchers feed pigs a bowl of anesthetic before slaughter to spare them the pain, but we assassins have no such compassion. As long as killing someone is possible, we'll do whatever it takes."

Shen Jue sneered. "How do you know that anesthetizing pigs is an act of compassion? Maybe the butchers just don't want to hear the pigs scream."

Xiahou Lian was taken aback, then chuckled wryly. “You’re right. A dying pig’s shrieks are pretty awful.”

Shen Jue gripped Jingtie with both hands and swung the saber in a fierce arc. “Enough talk. Let’s go!”

He raised his usually downcast eyes, his gaze sharp. A storm seemed to be brewing between his brows.

In an instant, Shen Jue’s bloodlust surged, growing mountainous. He let out a low cry as the blade clashed with Xiahou Lian’s wooden saber, its dull edge leaving a small crevice in the fragile wood.

Shen Jue’s ferocity ignited something in Xiahou Lian. His long-dormant blood roiled like a tidal wave, as if he’d gone back to the days when he’d participated in bloody battles. The urge to kill roared within him like a caged beast. Instead of clashing with Shen Jue head-on, he dodged and evaded. Even Jingtie’s dull edge could break a wooden sword in two.

The wooden saber flipped in Xiahou Lian’s hand as the two blades clashed in the air. The wood was soon scarred, its edge as jagged as a child’s crooked teeth. Shen Jue’s blows were fierce; in his hands, Jingtie was like a bloodthirsty demon in the night, its fangs bared. But Shen Jue was still new to the blade, and his reckless attacks left him open. Xiahou Lian quickly found a gap. He deflected a heavy strike from Jingtie, then thrust forward, moving the wooden sword diagonally to tap Shen Jue’s shoulder.

Shen Jue didn’t stop. He continued to swing Jingtie downward, aiming for Xiahou Lian’s neck.

“Hey. I hit your shoulder. You shouldn’t be able to move now.”

“I can,” Shen Jue said firmly.

Of course he could. As long as he had breath in his body, he could drive his blade into the enemy’s chest.

Xiahou Lian sighed. “Fine.”

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TIME FLOWED LIKE WATER, slipping through their fingers unnoticed.

Putting on a pair of trousers, Xiahou Lian realized that their hems were too short. He'd lost track of how long it had been since he last contacted Qiye Garden. They hadn't sent anyone to look for him, so they probably assumed he'd died in the palace. He was now a discarded pawn in Qiye Garden's game.

Xiahou Lian's thoughts wandered. If his mother found out, how would she react? She was usually away for a year at a time. She'd left Xiahou Lian alone on the mountain without a second thought when he was just eight. Right then, she was probably off gambling and drinking somewhere with no time to spare for her offspring.

Deep, nameless sorrow welled up inside him. Back on the mountain, he hadn't felt that often. After all, none of the kids there had parents, but he at least had a formidable mother he could boast about. Once he'd come down from the mountain, though, he'd realized that other children's mothers never left their sides; they'd sew them new clothes, cook them meals. Even mothers from poor families carried their children on their backs while they worked. His mother alone might as well not have existed.

As he opened the door to leave, he nearly bumped into a young eunuch. Xiahou Lian steadied the other boy. "Watch where you're going."

"Sorry, sorry!" the eunuch apologized in a high-pitched voice.

His tone made Xiahou Lian's skin crawl. He quickly waved the eunuch away—but then noticed that the eunuch carried a stack of paper lotus flowers. "What're those?"

"Lotus lanterns. The Mid-Autumn Festival is coming up, and the emperor is letting us release them on Yuqing Pool."

Xiahou Lian was stunned. "The Mid-Autumn Festival is already so soon?!"

Suddenly, noise erupted at the palace gates. Xiahou Lian hurried over and saw a eunuch in a sunflower-patterned robe carrying a set of clothing. The eunuch stood in the courtyard, scanning the area with sharp eyes, and

called out shrilly, “No one greets me or offers me tea? Are you all *dead*? Call your Shen-gonggong out.”

His imposing demeanor frightened the younger eunuchs, who stood frozen. Xiahou Lian was about to step forward when Shen Jue emerged, holding a cup of tea.

As the eunuch saw Shen Jue, his eyes lit up like flowers blooming, and he broke into a smile immediately. He quickly ordered someone to take the teacup from Shen Jue’s hands. “How flattering,” he said. “I am Cao Ling, an attendant eunuch from the Document Office. Wei-gonggong sent me to deliver these clothes to you.”

As he spoke, he glanced at Shen Jue. Most eunuchs were hunched from years of bowing; they lacked vitality, their posture slouched. Shen-gonggong, however, stood tall and straight as a pine or bamboo. Even his back’s slight curve seemed just right. No wonder Wei-gonggong held him in such high regard.

“Clothes?”

“You must not have heard yet. Qian-gonggong from the Document Office has been promoted, leaving a vacancy. Wei-gonggong immediately named you, without another word.” Cao Ling’s eyes curved into smiling crescents. “In a few days, when Wei-gonggong has some free time, you’ll serve him tea and formally acknowledge him as your godfather! From now on, we in the Document Office will count on your guidance, Shen-gonggong.”

Xiahou Lian felt as if he’d been struck by lightning. *Acknowledge Wei De as a godfather? Who in their right mind would recognize that eunuch bastard as any kind of father?!* He instinctively looked at Shen Jue, only to see that the other boy stood as calmly as always, his porcelain-like face betraying no emotion.

Shen Jue stared at the gold-threaded robes and hat Cao Ling carried, his gaze deep and contemplative. As an accompanying eunuch in the Document Office, an attendant who served the emperor directly, he would need to wear a black gauze hat with gold embroidery and a robe patterned with sunflowers, just like this Cao-gonggong. He would also be Wei De’s godson from now on—or to put it bluntly, his lapdog, forever at his beck

and call. He'd even have to throw in the occasional "Father" to keep things lively.

He hadn't sought this cursed fortune out, yet it had fallen into his lap. Was it fate?

As he reached out and took the gold-threaded robes and hat, a cold smile slowly spread across his lips. "I will of course rely on your guidance, Cao-gonggong. Please convey my regards to my father. His duties are arduous, and I hope he takes care of his health and spares his godson worry."

Chapter 29:
Layers of Sorrow

IT WAS EARLY MORNING. The rooster crowed three times; the sky was just beginning to lighten, still tinged with blue. The moon had set, and Mingyue had finished packing her father's medicine box and basket. Keeping track of the time, she stepped out the front door.

Across the street, a thick layer of fallen leaves covered the already low steps.

Lord Situ still hadn't returned home.

Mingyue sighed, then walked toward the alley's entrance with her head down. A vendor selling steamed buns called out to her, and she responded with a smile but said nothing.

As she was about to turn the corner, she heard the creak of a door opening behind her, followed by the clinking of chains. Mingyue turned her head instinctively and saw Situ Jin step out of his house. Instead of his usual imposing uniform, he wore simple, coarse clothing today. There was a small bundle on his back and shackles around his ankles, the attached chains rattling with every step.

Two guards followed him out. Situ Jin's expression remained calm, as if he weren't a prisoner under escort.

Shocked, Mingyue lifted her skirt and hurried over. "Lord Situ! You __"

"He's no longer a lord, miss," one guard said.

The nightingale song of her voice made Situ Jin stiffen. He instinctively surveyed his current appearance; the glaringly obvious shackles on his feet stirred a rare frustration in his usually unflappable heart. Reluctantly, he turned around and politely greeted her. "Miss Zhu."

"Could you gentlemen give us a moment?" Mingyue asked. "I just need a brief word with Lord—I mean, Mister Situ!" She fished some silver from her purse. "This is for your trouble."

“No need, no need. Go ahead.” The guards quickly waved off the silver. “Prisoners entering exile are usually permitted to say goodbye to family and friends before leaving the capital. This guy said he had no one, though, so we just had him pack his things.”

Mingyue thanked them, then immediately turned to Situ Jin. “Tell me, what happened? How can I help you? Do you know anyone in the palace who could intervene? How may I contact them?” Tears welled in her eyes, and she steadied her voice only with great effort.

Situ Jin froze in surprise, then replied awkwardly, “No need to trouble yourself. This is my fault, and there’s no help for it.” Only now, as he and Mingyue were about to part, did he dare look directly at her face. Her eyes were already red, the thin skin around them flushed like an actress’s rouged cheeks.

“Really? There’s really no way…? Don’t give up hope. I have some savings... Maybe we can try!”

Her words were rational yet naive. Mingyue’s meager savings would be less than a drop in the bucket to the men currently in power. Besides, how could Situ Jin bear to see her run around begging for help on his behalf? He shook his head and remained silent.

Mingyue’s heart grew cold. A man like Situ Jin never minced words. If he said there was no way to help him, then there truly wasn’t. Her tears finally spilled over, and she stood before Situ Jin, crying uncontrollably.

Situ Jin was at a loss. He had no experience comforting women. He wished to wipe her tears but hesitated, bound by propriety. Although he wanted to tell her to stop crying, that seemed useless.

A guard handed him a handkerchief. Situ Jin gratefully took it and offered it to Mingyue.

“Lord Situ,” Mingyue said suddenly.

“Yes?”

“My name is Zhu Mingyue. My father is Zhu Qinglan. I can embroider and identify medicinal herbs. My family’s medical skills are passed down only to the men, but I learned some in secret. I’ve been accompanying my father on house calls since I was young, so I’m used to

being out in public and speaking my mind. Many people say I lack propriety. Aunt Zheng next door says that no one would dare marry a girl like me, and I'll end up an old maid. But..."

But she liked him. Every morning, she woke early to dress up and peek through the crack in the door to see when he'd leave. The moment his door opened, she would sling her medicine basket over her shoulder, step out, and pretend to bump into him. Just one glance from him made her heart race all day, as if a restless rabbit were trapped inside.

After he was transferred to the military camp at Shili Slope, where he had room and board, he rarely returned home. Mingyue's heart had felt empty, and she'd wandered through her days in a daze. A few days earlier, she'd even mixed up a patient's herbs, earning her a scolding from her father. When she went out to gather herbs, she sometimes detoured to Shili Slope, standing at its highest point to glimpse the training grounds. Each time, she wondered whether one of the men wielding swords was Situ Jin.

Now he was leaving—going to a place far away from her. He might marry and have children there. They might never see one another again.

Mingyue cried bitterly. Each flutter of her long eyelashes sent large teardrops rolling down her cheeks.

"She lied," Situ Jin said.

Mingyue looked up in confusion.

"Aunt Zheng lied," Situ Jin continued. His eyes were like a gentle breeze breaking through thin ice. They rippled with emotion. "You're wonderful, truly. You're the most amazing maiden I've ever met."

Joy slowly filled Mingyue's heart, and her eyes brightened. Did his words mean she had a place in his heart? "Where are you going, Lord Situ?" she asked. "Will you come back?"

"To a border city in the north. Don't worry, the north is my home, and my swordsmanship is passable; the Tatars won't defeat me. As for whether I'll return, I guess that depends on luck."

Mingyue wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I'm sixteen this year, Lord Situ. I'll wait five years for you."

Situ Jin was stunned. His cheeks slowly flushed red. What did she mean, she would “wait” for him? Could it mean what he thought?

Suddenly, he wanted to flee. If not for the guards behind him and the chains on his feet, he’d have dashed away right that second.

He hesitated for a moment before stammering, “Five years is too long, Miss Mingyue. You—”

“What?” Mingyue sniffled and raised her chin. “You have that saying —‘Even four horses couldn’t break a gentleman’s word.’[20] Well, my word can’t be broken by *ten* of them!”

Mingyue was a delicate girl—her shoulders were so narrow that they could be grasped in one hand, fragile as a riverbank willow—but her statement was firm and unyielding. Her stubborn expression indicated that she wouldn’t change her mind even if the heavens collapsed.

Situ Jin sighed. “Fine,” he said hoarsely. “If I haven’t returned in five years, Miss Mingyue, please find someone else. Don’t wait for me.”

Mingyue shook her head. “No. If you haven’t returned in five years, I’ll go north to find you. I’ll wait for you, and you must wait for me.”

“Miss!”

Mingyue slipped a bracelet from her wrist. “This was my mother’s. Take it—it’s very important to me. You must return it to me someday.”

“I can’t.”

“I want you to owe me,” Mingyue insisted, holding back her tears. “If you do, you’ll remember me.”

Situ Jin hesitated.

One of the guards stepped forward. “You’re a grown man. Stop pussyfooting around. A wife just fell from the sky, and you don’t want her? I don’t understand you at all. We’re in a hurry—just take it.” With that, he grasped the bracelet Mingyue held and shoved it into Situ Jin’s hand.

The jade bracelet was still warm with the heat of Mingyue’s skin. It burned in Situ Jin’s hand, and his face flushed red.

Mingyue took a deep breath and forced a smile. “Until we meet again, Lord Situ.”

The girl's figure gradually disappeared into the distance, her tea-colored dress blending into the early morning light like a faint ink stroke.

Until we meet again, Situ Jin silently repeated in his heart.

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DUSK FELL.

The palace was mostly constructed from golden-thread nanmu wood. Though it was a high-quality wood, its overuse lent the building an oppressive gloom. As soon as the sun set, the Document Office plunged into darkness. The beams and pillars' heavy shadows pressed down, making it hard to breathe. A single candle flickered; the eerie light it cast on Wei De's wrinkled face made him look like a ghoul from hell.

Shen Jue stood below, his head bowed as usual, his jade-like hands holding a memorial. Slowly, he read, "'Emperor Gaozu once decreed that eunuchs must not interfere in state affairs—that they should only serve within the palace. Those who violate that should be punished without mercy. Yet now, under our wise emperor's rule, there are those who act fearlessly and disrupt the court's order: for instance, the Eastern Depot eunuch Wei De. I dare list his crimes for Your Majesty's consideration. Wei De—originally a street ruffian, illiterate, castrated in middle age—sneaked into the palace. At first, he feigned loyalty and trustworthiness to gain favor, but now he dares to commit great evils and disrupt governance...'"

Shen Jue's pleasant voice flowed like a clear spring. Everyone else was frozen in fear. The young eunuch massaging Wei De's shoulders gradually lightened his touch until it was as weightless as a mosquito. Wei De's mind was fortunately elsewhere, or he'd have dismissed the eunuch long ago.

Shen Jue continued, "'I humbly beg Your Majesty to execute Wei De, abolish the Eastern Depot, and restore order to the court. Then the land will be at peace. I, Wan Xian, kneel and plead for Your Majesty's mercy.'"

With that, Shen Jue closed the memorial and stood silently.

The room was deathly quiet, save for the clacking of Wei De's prayer beads, like the tick of a Western clock. After a while, everyone's breathing seemed to synchronize with the sound.

Suddenly, the string of beads snapped. Beads scattered across the floor, rolling in every direction. Everyone was startled; they all knelt immediately, pressing their heads to the ground.

"What 'great evils' have I committed?!" Wei De demanded. "A 'palace that knows only Eunuch Wei, not the emperor'?! This is an accusation of treason and rebellion!"

"Please calm yourself, Wei-gonggong." Qian Zhengde, always bold, crawled forward and poured tea for Wei De. "His Majesty has long since stopped caring about state affairs. Since this memorial is in our hands, we can suppress it and find an excuse to exile Wan Xian far away. If you're still angry then, we can go further and eliminate him—make an example of him to show the officials that the Eastern Depot and Document Office aren't to be trifled with."

Wei De glanced at Qian Zhengde but then turned to Shen Jue. "Shen Jue, you've always been insightful. What do you think?"

The composed young man pondered for a moment, then replied slowly, "Wan Xian has been an official for over twenty years, and he is set to retire this winter solstice. He has always been cautious—no, cowardly. I think he might just be seeking fame by suddenly condemning you, Father."

"Hmm," Wei De said. "Go on."

A disgruntled Qian Zhengde drew back, kneeling, and glanced at Shen Jue. The young man's profile was emotionless; his eyes, fixed on the carpet, didn't move an inch. Despite being a lowly eunuch from the Document Office, Shen Jue was permitted to stand at Wei De's side. Meanwhile, the newly promoted Qian Zhengde was disdained. Qian Zhengde secretly gritted his teeth.

Shen Jue continued, "In my humble opinion, Father, it would be best to ignore Wan Xian and let things run their course. As the saying goes, patience leads to great achievements. If you demote or dismiss Wan Xian, you could play into his hands and cement his reputation as a righteous official, provoking the literati to defend him. Even if the memorial doesn't

reach His Majesty's eyes, rumors could reach his ears. Any loss would outweigh the gain."

"Well said, Shen Jue. You're not yet twenty, but you have a seasoned strategist's foresight. Very good."

"You flatter me, Father."

"The eldest prince injured his leg falling from his horse," Wei De mused. "The injury to his once-healthy son has put His Majesty in a foul mood, and his temper is unpredictable. I've served him for many years, but he might take his anger out on me regardless. These fools are just adding fuel to the fire. Loathsome wretches!" He coughed harshly, then added, "But I must teach that old donkey Wan Xian a lesson. He wants fame? I'll give it to him! Hmph. If I don't put him through his paces, he'll think the Eastern Depot is toothless. Xiao Yan, send people out to spread rumors in the court and streets."

"The rumors, Wei-gonggong?" a eunuch quickly responded.

"The old man seduced his daughter-in-law, and they're having an affair. That should make for entertaining gossip—enough to keep people laughing for a while."

With a few words, Wei De would turn Wan Xian into a laughingstock and his son into a cuckold, ruining Wan Xian's reputation and sowing discord between father and son. That kind of ruthless move was typical of eunuchs; if they couldn't win in the open, they resorted to underhanded tactics. They had no use for gentlemanly conduct nor measured responses. As long as they achieved their goals, any means—however despicable—were justified.

"What a brilliant plan, Wei-gonggong," Qian Zhengde fawned. "Let's see whether that old fool dares speak out of turn again."

Wei De threw a teacup at Qian Zhengde's head. "'Old fool'?" he shouted. "Who are you calling old?"

Wei De was over seventy, an age by which most officials had retired. But unlike civil officials, eunuchs were bound to the palace until death. Wei De could call someone else an "old donkey," but he wouldn't stand for being called old himself.

Qian Zhengde, covered in blood and tea, knelt and begged for forgiveness.

Wei De's anger didn't subside. He walked to the window and looked out through the latticework. The Forbidden City loomed darkly, its eaves and corners locked in combat, casting shadows like clashing weapons. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Get to work on my orders. All you do is flatter me—you never do any real work. Useless, all of you!"

Qian Zhengde nodded obsequiously, not daring to raise his head this time.

"I'm leaving the palace," Wei De added. "Xiao Yan and Shen Jue will accompany me. The rest of you, get back to your duties."

Wei De put on his black gauze hat, and Shen Jue and Xiao Yan followed him out. Xiao Yan of the Eastern Depot was to accompany Wei De out of the palace. He carried one of the palace's lanterns, walking slightly behind Wei De to illuminate his path. It twisted through a maze of walkways, one after another, the lanterns stretching into the distance resembling a long, winding serpent.

"How is the newly promoted Consort Li's health?" Wei De asked suddenly, after they'd walked a short distance.

The emperor had few descendants. The once-promising eldest prince had been disabled falling from his horse. As ruler of the nation, an emperor was under countless watchful eyes. He didn't need to be a paragon of virtue, but he did need to be healthy. If the reigning emperor managed to have more children, the eldest prince would likely never ascend to the throne.

Shen Jue understood exactly what Wei De was asking. "The palace maids reported that Consort Li missed her last cycle," he replied. "However, she has always been in poor health, and there have been previous false alarms. Pregnancy can only be confirmed after fifty days, so I've instructed the imperial physicians to check again in twenty."

Wei De's previously dark expression softened, and he smiled. "Jue-er, among all my godchildren, you're the most capable—but also the least clever."

"What do you mean, Father? I don't understand."

“Qian Zhengde only knows how to flatter; he has no abilities at all. Do you know why I promoted him?”

Even if he did know, he had to play dumb. “I’m not sure,” Shen Jue replied.

“Because he smiles and knows how to talk. That’s why I promoted him. Look at you—you always wear that deadpan expression. We eunuchs have some power, but we’re ultimately the emperor’s dogs—servants who must please our master. Smile more, say pretty things, and our master will be happy. That’s how you get ahead quickly.”

Shen Jue’s hands tensed. “I understand,” he said softly.

“Then go back to your room and practice in front of a mirror. If I don’t see improvement in a few days, you won’t stay in the Document Office. What use is a dog that can’t please its master?”

Chapter 30:
Twin Misfortunes

BY THE TIME Shen Jue had escorted Wei De to the Liuli Gate, the sky was completely dark, and stars hung high above. Xiao Yan knelt by the carriage; stepping on his knee, Wei De climbed inside.

Even the Eastern Depot's second-in-command was nothing more than a stepping stone for Wei De.

A procession of agents followed Wei De's carriage as it departed. Shen Jue's eyes darkened as he adjusted his robes and hat, then made his way along the path back to the inner palace. Since he'd been busy making a report in the duty room, he hadn't yet eaten. He hadn't seen Xiahou Lian since he left the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard many days ago. Tomorrow was the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the Ghost Festival, and there was a mountain of tasks to handle in the palace.

After some thought, Shen Jue packed two meals. Now that his status had changed, the kitchen reserved meals for him, and he didn't have to fight with other eunuchs for food. He grabbed a helping of Xiahou Lian's favorite crystal shrimp dumplings and headed to the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard.

The cold palace remained as desolate as ever. The lanterns hadn't been replaced in a long time; their aged parchment was coated in a thick layer of dust, bestowing their light with a hazy, dreamlike glow. The plants along the path had grown wild with neglect, their tendrils sprawling across the walkway to tug pitifully at the robes of passersby.

The eunuchs who had once worked alongside Shen Jue in the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard greeted him joyfully and led him in.

"Shen-gonggong, you're a truly nostalgic person! Even after moving to the Document Office, you still remember our Sixi?! He's unwell today and went to bed early. Shall I wake him for you?"

Shen Jue tilted his head slightly and frowned. "He went to bed without dinner?"

“That’s right,” the eunuch said. “Actually, he hasn’t felt well for a few days now, but he didn’t pay it any mind. You know how it is—people like us can’t summon the imperial physicians. We just have to tough it out. But with you here to check on him, Sixi’s sure to recover!”

Shen Jue grunted in acknowledgment and quickened his pace. Xiahou Lian was as strong as an ox, daring to wash with well water in even the coldest weather. How could he have fallen ill? Shen Jue furrowed his brow as he realized that he had no medicinal herbs, and he made a mental note to fetch honeysuckle from the imperial physicians’ office the next day.

He and the other eunuch walked single file down the dim corridor. Faint light reflected off the intricate patterns on Shen Jue’s robe, the fabric swaying like floating clouds as he moved. The young eunuch watched with envy.

“Shen-gonggong, your rise to the Document Office has been meteoric,” he remarked. “Everyone knows that the inner palace’s Document Office is like the outer court’s Hanlin Academy. Only those who pass the imperial exams may enter the Grand Secretariat, and only those who enter the Document Office can join the Directorate of Ceremonial. As Wei-gonggong’s godson, it’s only a matter of time before you become the next head of the Directorate—”

“Silence!” Shen Jue shot him a cold glare, his usually gentle face now sharp as winter frost. “If you can’t keep your mouth shut, don’t blame me when you get into trouble with someone else.”

“Yes, yes—you’re right, Shen-gonggong!” The young eunuch trembled and quickly lowered his head.

When they reached Xiahou Lian’s room, Shen Jue gave the eunuch a slight nod. Then he turned and entered, closing the door tightly behind him and leaving the eunuch outside. Recalling Shen Jue’s earlier look, the eunuch touched his nose and walked off, still fearful.

Xiahou Lian hadn’t lit any lamps, and the room was pitch-black. When Shen Jue entered, Xiahou Lian didn’t make a sound. Shen Jue stood awkwardly by the door, unsure how to start the conversation.

Their last meeting had ended on bad terms.

Xiahou Lian had vehemently opposed Shen Jue acknowledging Wei De as his godfather, even threatening to wield Jingtie in a fight against the other boy. He'd always been hotheaded and stubborn, acting recklessly when angered. He'd never considered that Shen Jue was no longer Xie Jinglan—Xie Jinglan could study and become an official, remaining upright, but Shen Jue couldn't.

But as long as Xiahou Lian stayed, Shen Jue would tolerate his tantrums.

Shen Jue sighed deeply and tapped the doorframe. "Xiahou Lian, I brought crystal shrimp dumplings. Do you want some?"

Xiahou Lian didn't respond.

The room was silent. Shen Jue peered through the darkness at the closed bed-curtains; behind them lay Xiahou Lian's figure like a heavy cloud.

Shen Jue lowered his thick lashes. Placing the meal box on the table, he lit a short candle. "Why can't you understand, Xiahou Lian? In the palace, eunuchs are slaves to their masters, bound by layers of dependence. Beyond relying on the emperor and his consorts, the only option is attaching oneself to a powerful eunuch. It's the most convenient shortcut. Acknowledging that villain as a godfather is just a temporary humiliation. Once I'm powerful, won't today's shame be avenged?"

The curtains remained still. Growing increasingly agitated, Shen Jue raised his voice. "Xiahou Lian, are you even listening?"

He strode forward and yanked open the curtains, only to find Xiahou Lian lying there with his eyes closed, drenched in sweat, his hair sticking to his face as if he'd just been fished out of water. Shen Jue panicked and shook Xiahou Lian. "What's wrong?" he shouted. "How did you get so sick?"

Xiahou Lian finally stirred, barely able to open his eyes. Weakly, he asked, "How come you're here?" His head spun, and he was still fixated on Shen Jue acknowledging Wei De as his godfather. "Don't call that eunuch 'Father,' Shaoye..." he murmured.

Shen Jue put his hand to Xiahou Lian's forehead; it was burning. He frowned. "You have a fever. Wait here—I'll get you medicine."

As he turned to leave, Xiahou Lian grabbed his wrist with surprising strength and pulled him back, gritting his teeth. “Don’t go!”

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t go anywhere! Listen to me!” Xiahou Lian panted. “Studying is still the right path, Shaoye!”

Shen Jue laughed bitterly. “I’m a eunuch now. How could I take the imperial exams? Have you ever seen a eunuch scholar?”

“Who’s going to pull down your pants to check?!” Now slightly more alert, Xiahou Lian struggled to sit up and speak to Shen Jue. “If you’re worried about money, don’t be. I’ve saved up silver for the past two years. It’ll be more than enough to support your studies.”

Xiahou Lian began to ramble.

“I’ve saved a hundred and twenty taels of silver. Renting a small house in the capital will cost twenty taels. Food and other expenses will be thirty-six taels a year at most. You can’t cook or do laundry, so hiring a maid would cost another twenty taels. Hmm… It seems like I may *not* have enough...”

Shen Jue didn’t interrupt.

“But it’s fine,” Xiahou Lian continued. “My mother has money. I’ll ask her for some. You’re so smart; you won’t need to study forever. Maybe you’ll pass the exams in a couple years.”

The fool didn’t even know that the imperial exams were only held once every three years. “You can keep calculating. I’m going to get medicine,” Shen Jue said, standing up.

“Don’t...don’t go!” Xiahou Lian leaned half off the bed, but he was so weak that he nearly fell out. Shen Jue, startled, hurriedly grabbed his arm to steady him.

Xiahou Lian lay back on the bed and sighed. “I’m not sick! This...this is poison.”

Shen Jue was shocked. “Someone poisoned you?”

“No.” Xiahou Lian lay back down to gather his strength before speaking. “It’s Seven Fifteen. Every Qiye Garden assassin has to take the

antidote annually, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. I forgot to bring mine. The medicine you get won't help."

"Why didn't you say so earlier?! And if that's the case, why did you stay? Are you trying to die?!"

"I thought I could tough it out..."

"Has anyone ever toughed it out before?"

"No."

Shen Jue felt like he was about to vomit blood.

"I mean, no one's *tried* before, so I wanted to give it a shot," Xiahou Lian said with a bitter smile. "But now, it seems...a bit harder than I thought."

Hard? It was downright dangerous. Xiahou Lian's entire body felt weak, like his limbs were stuffed with cotton, unable to exert any strength. It hadn't been so bad earlier, but now even his vision was blurring. Shen Jue seemed to shift in and out of focus, and Xiahou Lian's mind felt like mush; he couldn't think clearly.

"Get me some water," Xiahou Lian said, his voice hoarse.

He propped himself up against the bedpost. Shen Jue tried to hand him a cup, but as soon as he let go, the cup dropped to the ground and shattered.

He couldn't even hold a cup now.

"Xiahou Lian..." Shen Jue's voice trembled. "You..."

"It's fine." Xiahou Lian shook his head, wanting to offer the other boy some comfort. When he looked down, though, he saw that his hands were covered in blood. His scalp numbed, and he froze.

Only then did he realize that his nose and mouth had been bleeding for some time. Bright-red blood had dripped onto the quilt—a horrifying sight. Shaky, he lay back down, staring blankly at the bed's canopy. Within moments, it seemed as if he were only breathing out, not in.

This was it. He was bleeding from all seven orifices. He was done for.

Xiahou Lian had always been a troublemaker, fearless and reckless, even daring to steal from the abbot. But now, facing death, he realized he was nonetheless afraid of dying.

What would happen after death? He didn't have time to think about it. Figures flashed before his eyes. The first was his unreliable mother. When he died here in the palace, she'd probably still be carousing in a brothel or slaughtering her way through some sect, her blade gleaming like water as her prey scattered. She'd always been like that, carefree and self-indulgent. Xiahou Lian wasn't a son to her but a burden.

A pang of loneliness rose in his usually carefree chest, like a lone goose treading on snow. He'd be buried in this desolate courtyard, anonymous. His mother, his shifu, and Uncle Duan would never find him again.

Xiahou Lian's fingers twitched weakly, and a warm hand grasped his. He turned his head and saw Shen Jue's tearful eyes.

"Xiahou Lian, how are you feeling? Don't scare me!"

At least it wasn't all bad. He had a brother to see him off.

"I..." Xiahou Lian opened his mouth, and blood trickled from the corners. Shen Jue took out a handkerchief and wiped it away, but it kept flowing, impossible to staunch.

"My body feels so weak—like I'm about to ascend to the heavens," Xiahou Lian said softly. "Do you think I might really become an immortal? Maybe I'm a reincarnated celestial being, and the heavens are calling me back."

Shen Jue gripped Xiahou Lian's hand tightly, as if he could keep the boy from leaving. He buried his face in Xiahou Lian's palm. "A-Lian, you can't die. I won't let you die!"

"Listen to me, Shaoye. I need to give you my last words." Xiahou Lian wiped tears from Shen Jue's face with a faint smile.

He'd always been so kindhearted. Even on his deathbed, he was busy comforting others.

In truth, he'd always felt guilty about Shen Jue—guilty for not telling him about Qiye Garden's assassinations sooner, and guilty for not saving

Aunt Lan. Shen Jue had already suffered so much, and now he was about to lose Xiahou Lian too. Dying would be a relief for Xiahou Lian—no more pain, no more concerns. But Shen Jue would have to continue suffering alone in the palace.

The promises Xiahou Lian had once made to Shen Jue—to take him to see the lantern festival, to stay by his side, to help him seek his revenge—would never be fulfilled.

He truly was sorry.

“If you ever get a chance to leave the palace, follow the old process: Go to the highest point in the city and leave Jingtie there. My mother will come find you. Her name’s Xiahou Pei. She’s very beautiful, but her personality’s a bit odd. You won’t need to say much. Just tell her that Xiao-Lian was disloyal and can’t care for her in her old age. Tell her to look after herself, drink less, and remember to bring a ‘sheath’ the next time she goes on a mission. She shouldn’t act like she’s invincible. I hid some silver under the third tree in front of the temple gate in Qiye Garden—a hundred and twenty taels. Tell her to give you that. She doesn’t need money. Consider that your inheritance from me.”

“I don’t want it!” Shen Jue shook his head desperately, tears streaming down his cheeks. Suddenly thinking of something, he looked up. “Your mother! Yes—your mother must have the antidote to save you. I’ll go find her!”

Although half-dead, Xiahou Lian grabbed him. “Find her? In the palace? How?”

“No...” Shen Jue’s eyes darted nervously. “I…I saw your mother the night I found you. She killed a few imperial guards. She was looking for you.”

Hearing that, Xiahou Lian froze. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

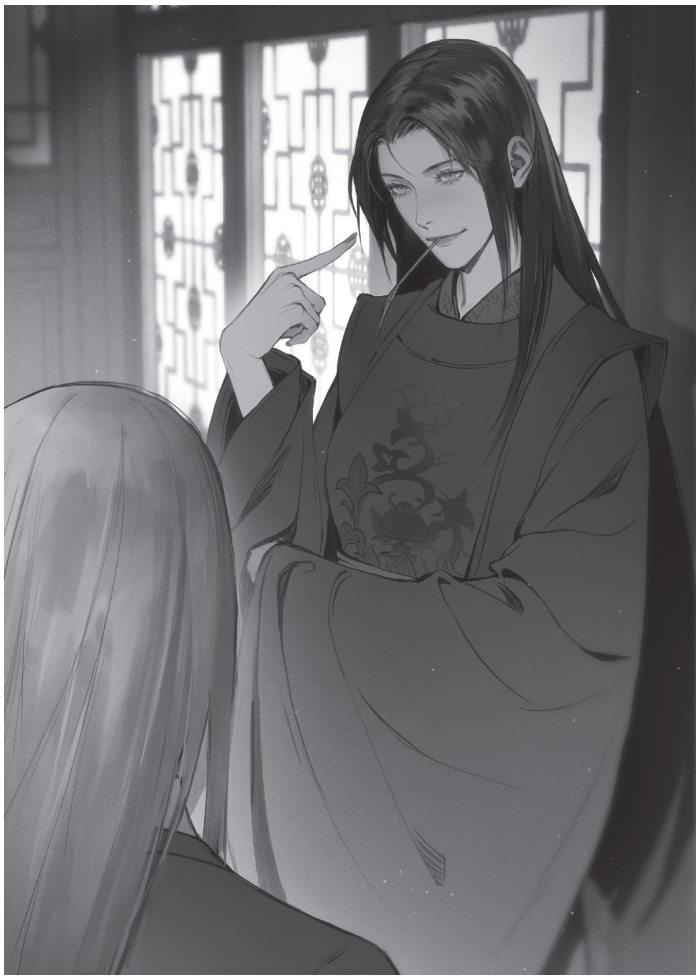
“I was afraid you’d go looking for her if you knew. I...” Shen Jue couldn’t meet Xiahou Lian’s eyes. He clenched his teeth and stood. “I’ll go find her now. She might still be in the palace. If I can’t find her, I’ll find a way to leave. Wait for me!”

“Shen Jue!”

Shen Jue didn’t look back. He rushed to the door and opened it. A tall figure stood leaning against the walkway wall, a blade of grass dangling from her lips. This woman’s head wasn’t covered with feathers. Her jet-black hair cascaded down her back, making her skin appear snowy and her lips bloodred. When she saw Shen Jue, her gaze swept over him like moonlight over a calm lake.

It wasn’t Consort Gao. Shen Jue stepped back warily.

“His mother,” the woman said, pointing at herself and smiling. “Xiahou Pei.”



Chapter 31:
Parting Ways

XIAHOU LIAN'S MOTHER had an aura of violence that seemingly couldn't be cleansed. Every smile or frown seemed to conceal a threat.

This was what a true assassin looked like.

Thinking of Xiahou Lian, Shen Jue suppressed the fear that rose in his heart. "Xiahou Lian, he—"

"I know. Move aside." Xiahou Pei brushed past Shen Jue and walked into the room, stopping by Xiahou Lian's bed.

Xiahou Lian's eyes widened in disbelief. "Consort Gao?!"

"Fucking hell. I can't believe I raised such a foolish son. I just changed my face a bit. You don't even recognize your own mother?" Pulling a pill from her pocket, Xiahou Pei said irritably, "Two options: Stay here and wait to die or take this pill and return to Qiye Garden. Pick one."

Xiahou Lian finally understood. Through the blood covering his face, he said weakly, "You really are my mother."

"Of course. If I weren't, would I have stayed in the palace with you so long, pretending to be a madwoman?" Xiahou Pei tore her mask off and threw it on the ground, revealing a face that was both strikingly sharp and beautiful. She and Xiahou Lian looked very much alike, especially their eyes, which were as dark and keen as blades.

"Take it, Xiahou Lian," Shen Jue suddenly interjected. "Don't stay in the palace anymore. You don't belong here."

"That's right." Xiahou Pei smiled. "You're so foolish, you could end up as a meager snack for anyone here." She turned to Shen Jue. "You—kid—stop looking at me like that. I can't do anything about this. Those born in Qiye Garden are destined to live this way. Everyone has to take the antidote on the fifteenth day of the seventh month…me included. Only the abbot's got the antidote, and his swordsmanship is unparalleled; he could even force me to admit defeat. I can only serve as his obedient pawn."

Shen Jue averted his eyes.

Sighing, Xiahou Lian took the pill from Xiahou Pei's hand, chewed a few times, and swallowed. His body was still weak, and a wave of drowsiness overwhelmed him.

"Mother, let me sleep for a bit," he said faintly. "We can leave tomorrow morning."

Xiahou Pei agreed casually, then wiped the blood from his face, tucked him in, and stepped out from behind the bed-curtain. She sat at the square table and poured herself a cup of tea.

"Truthfully, he only had one choice, didn't he?" Shen Jue said suddenly.

Xiahou Pei stopped blowing on her tea to look at Shen Jue.

"If he hadn't agreed to go with you, you would've killed me."

Xiahou Pei chuckled. "I never said that."

"What exactly *is* Seven Fifteen?"

"An addictive drug from the Miao regions, though not quite as addictive as similar drugs. Stop taking those for half a month, and they'll make your life hell. But withdrawal from Seven Fifteen acts up every year on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. Take it, and you're fine. If you don't...you *can* tough it out, but the consequences are unpredictable."

"The Miao regions..." Shen Jue murmured. "Are there no more details?"

"None."

"And is there really no other way?" Shen Jue lowered his head. "He doesn't want to go back to Qiye Garden. You know too that he doesn't want to kill."

"*You* don't want to be a eunuch. So can you stop being one?" Xiahou Pei asked indifferently.

"You—"

"You're smart, little Shaoye—much smarter than my fool of a son, at least." Xiahou Pei's porcelain teacup gleamed in her fingers. "In life,

everyone has their own path. Paths might cross, but they'll never be the same."

Shen Jue smiled. "You don't know any methods of divination, ma'am. How can you be so sure?"

"No, I can't divine. I can read people, though."

"Oh? In your eyes, what kind of person am I?"

"Treacherous, cunning, shameless, and despicable."

"So blunt, ma'am." Shen Jue clenched a fist tightly under the table, but the smile on his lips didn't waver. "But would you be willing to make a bet with your humble nephew?"

"I haven't got a nephew like you," Xiahou Pei said bluntly. "But what's the bet?"

"I bet I can rescue Xiahou Lian from Qiye Garden and give him his freedom. After that, no one in the world will ever force him to bow his head or obey orders again!"

"That's interesting." Xiahou Pei propped her chin on her hand, her slender fingers covering her smile. "May I ask what kind of magic my Xiao-Lian possesses to make you go to such lengths for him? The brat can't even wield his saber correctly; his forms are all over the place. He's going to ruin my reputation."

Shen Jue lowered his thick lashes and said softly, "You give me a hawthorn fruit, and I'll repay you with a piece of jade.[21] That's all."

"Enough, little Shaoye. You should focus on helping yourself first. Avenging the Xie family won't be easy."

"The emperor is nearly fifty. He wastes his days in hedonism, obsessing over alchemy and immortality. He won't last long. When the throne changes hands, Wei De's life will end." Shen Jue raised his eyes and looked directly at Xiahou Pei. "Dare you take my bet, ma'am?"

Xiahou Pei's smile deepened. "How long will the bet last? And what are the stakes?"

"Give me ten years. You'll bet your trust, and I'll bet my life. If Xiahou Lian hasn't left Qiye Garden in ten years, my life will be yours."

An absurd bet, but Xiahou Pei was an absurd person. She stared at Shen Jue for a long time, then slapped the table. “Deal.”

Shen Jue exhaled slowly. “In that case, ma’am, what more can you tell me about Seven Fifteen?”

After all, Xiahou Pei was older than Shen Jue. He’d known from the start that she didn’t trust him and that she was hiding many things about the Garden.

But things were different now. Shen Jue had earned her trust.

“I truly don’t know much about Seven Fifteen,” she replied. “I’ve told you everything I can.”

Shen Jue frowned. “Ma’am.”

“However…” Xiahou Pei smiled brightly. “Ye Facai, the manager of Jixiang Inn in the south of the city; Hong Sanniang, the madam of the brothel in Hualiu Alley, and her adopted daughter Hong Qiaojie; Zhu Kai, the wine seller in Jiuzao Alley; and—ah, yes—Yuan Zimei, the proofreader from the Office of the Heir Apparent—they’re all Qiye Garden spies. Since I’ve given you their names, what you do next is up to you.”

Shen Jue nodded. A clever calculation; the lowest-level Garden spies wouldn’t be a great loss if discarded. Xiahou Lian had once said that the spies knew very little about the Garden; they didn’t even know where its temple was. Even if Shen Jue captured them, it would have little impact. Therefore, he could only observe how the Seven Fifteen affected them. He couldn’t do anything beyond that.

Even if Shen Jue harbored ill intentions toward the Garden or Xiahou Lian, this wouldn’t allow him to act on those.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Shen Jue said.

“All right. I need to take Xiao-Lian away now,” Xiahou Pei said, setting down her teacup.

Shen Jue was startled. “So soon?”

“Night’s the best time to travel.”

“How do you plan to get out?” Shen Jue asked, standing.

“I’ll fight our way out. How else?”

Mother and son clearly shared the same reckless nature. Shen Jue sighed and said, “I know a secret passage. A deep well outside leads directly outside the palace to the Jing Mountains.”

Xiahou Pei turned to him, surprised. “So that map’s in *your* hands.”

“No,” Shen Jue said. “It’s in my mind.”

Xiahou Pei patted his shoulder. “If only you were my son,” she said. “The difference between people is so vast. All right—farewell, little Shaoye. Take care of yourself in the palace. Don’t give Xiao-Lian cause to worry.”

She dressed Xiahou Lian roughly. Despite all the activity, Xiahou Lian didn’t wake up—owing, perhaps, to the Seven Fifteen.

Not yet fully grown, Xiahou Lian was between adolescence and adulthood, his body still somewhat skinny, not yet an imposing figure. The lingering effects of the poison now left him pale as a paper doll. His eyes were tightly closed, and there was a faint trace of blood smudged like unwashed rouge at the corner of his lips.

Suppressing the urge to hug him, Shen Jue gently wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. “Farewell, Xiahou Lian.”

We will absolutely meet again.

Xiahou Pei lifted Xiahou Lian onto her shoulder, then strode outside and across the moonlit ground, heading for the dry well.

Shen Jue suddenly remembered that Jingtie was stowed in the treasure cabinet. He fetched it quickly and called out, “Ma’am! Jingtie!”

Still carrying Xiahou Lian, Xiahou Pei waved her hand dismissively. “It’s yours now!”

Shen Jue held the black saber and stood by the window, watching Xiahou Pei leap into the well with Xiahou Lian. They instantly disappeared in a flutter of robes; he couldn’t even hear their footsteps. The courtyard abruptly fell silent but for the chirping of insects.

It was terribly, terribly quiet.

It was as though Shen Jue had returned to the days before his reunion with Xiahou Lian, back when he’d swept snow alone in the palace. After

all, wasn’t a moonlight-bathed courtyard just like one blanketed in snow? Shen Jue exhaled softly and could almost see his breath crystallize into frost, faint white mist curling into the air.

He’d hoped never to return to those cold days—but in the end, here he was.

The shadows of leaves and flowers swayed in the endless moonlight. The young man in thin robes stood there with a lonely gaze, his eyes like a sorrowful swan’s.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

There's Something Wrong with the Chief

VOLUME 2

CHARACTER
GUIDE
&
GLOSSARY

HISTORICAL NOTE

There's Something Wrong with the Chief takes place during the fictional Qi dynasty, which is heavily inspired by the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

XIE JINGLAN 谢惊澜: The third young master of the Xie family. His name means "startling waves." He gains the blade Jingtie (静铁, "Silent Iron").

XIAHOU LIAN 夏侯潋: A child assassin from Qiye Garden. His name means "rippling."

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

QIYE GARDEN

XIAHOU PEI 夏侯霈: The Garden's strongest assassin. The Garuda of the Eight Legions. Xiahou Lian's mother. Armed with Hengbo (横波, "Great Waves").

QIU YE 秋叶: A Garden assassin. The Garden's master of disguise. The Kinnara of the Eight Legions. Armed with Qiushui (秋水, "Autumn Water").

DUAN JIU 段九: An assassin close to Xiahou Lian (who calls him "Uncle Duan").

SHIXIN BUDDHA 弒心佛陀: The old abbot in charge of the Garden.

XIE HOUSEHOLD

XIE BINGFENG 谢秉风: The patriarch of the Xie family. An official of middling rank.

LADY XIAO 萧氏: The matriarch of the Xie family. Xie Jinglan's stepmother.

XIE JINGTAO 谢惊涛: The first young master of the Xie family. Lady Xiao's son. Bullies Xie Jinglan frequently.

AUNT LAN 兰姑姑: An elderly maid who serves Xie Jinglan.

LIANXIANG 莲香: A young maid who serves Xie Jinglan.

MATRON LIU 刘嬷嬷: The head matron of the Xie family. Answers to Lady Xiao.

OTHERS

DAI SHENGYAN 戴圣言: An elderly Confucian scholar famed for wisdom and integrity.

CONSORT GAO 高妃: A mad consort in the Fourth Qianxi Courtyard.

SITU JIN 司徒谨: A member of the army. Practices the Blizzard Saber style.

ZHU MINGYUE 朱明月: Situ Jin's neighbor. Her father owns a medical clinic.

WEI DE 魏德: Leader of the Directorate of Ceremonial. Chief of the Eastern Depot. Extremely powerful at court.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning "big" or "elder," which can be added before titles for elders, like "dage" or "dajie," or before a name.

-ER: "Child." Affectionate suffix.

LAO-: “Old.” Friendly prefix.

-GE: “Older brother.” Affectionate suffix for any older boy or man.

-JIE: “Older sister.” Affectionate suffix for any older girl or woman.

-DI: “Younger brother.” Affectionate suffix for a younger boy.

-MEI: “Younger sister.” Affectionate suffix for a younger girl.

SAN-: “Third.” Prefix.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger,” which can be added before names or titles for juniors like “xiaodi.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

Courtesy Addresses

GONGGONG: Polite address for a eunuch serving in the palace.

SHAOYE: “Young master.” Polite address for young men.

XIAOJIE: “Young lady.” Polite address for young women.

XIANSHENG: Polite address for men. Originally only for those who possessed great learning or who had contributed significantly to society.

GLOSSARY

CONCUBINES: In Imperial China, wealthy men commonly took concubines in addition to a wife. The concubines were expected to live with the man and bear him children. In general, more concubines correlated to higher social status. Thus, a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have dozens or even a hundred.

DIVINATION: In Imperial China, fortune-telling was an art practiced by the highly learned. Divination had many separate branches. One important task for fortune tellers was divining the best name for a newborn based on that child's birth time.

EUNUCHS, THE EASTERN DEPOT, AND THE EMBROIDERED UNIFORM GUARD: Relationships between emperors and their literati officials were often tense. Many emperors raised trusted eunuchs over the imperial ministers, giving the eunuch faction enormous power.

The Eastern Depot, led by eunuchs, was established under those circumstances. It spied on officials, rooting out dissenters. Later, it gained the authority to punish such dissenters through the Embroidered Uniform Guard, the dynasty's secret police. The literati decried the Eastern Depot for their perceived gross abuses of power. The organization remains infamous.

THE IMPERIAL EXAMINATIONS: A series of exams designed to select the brightest from the populace, positioning them to serve in the court as officials. The exams comprised three stages: entry, provincial, and finally palace exams. They focused heavily on Confucian doctrine and literature, and passing was a great honor. Each exam's top scorer, or "principal graduate," returned home showered in accolades.Post-Tang Chinese society forbade an official to pass his position directly to his son. Therefore, the only way for families to remain part of the aristocracy was through the imperial examinations. The exams themselves were open to all, making

them the sole means by which those from humble backgrounds could climb the social ladder.

THE JIANGHU: An underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves using their own moral codes.

MEMORIALS: Documents written by officials to the emperor. A memorial followed a strict format determined by the problem it was written to address.

THE NINE-RANK SYSTEM: During certain dynasties, officials were divided into ranks denoting their status within the court. First-rank officials were highest; ninth-rank officials were lowest.

PROSTITUTES AND COURTESANS: In Imperial China, many of these women doubled as entertainers and were able to sing and dance. Those who won the favor of rich and powerful men could leave their brothel through marriage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yang Su

A balding girl from the post-90s generation. Good at sleeping, zoning out, and eating. Someone with no grand aspirations in life; writing is her only consistent endeavor. “Life is a journey, and I’m willing to use my pen as my horse and gallop forward.”

Footnotes

Chapter 1: The Coolness of Fresh Rain

[1] From “On the Upper Reaches of Yingtian Temple, for Presentation to Master Qian” by Tang dynasty poet Fang Gan.

Chapter 2: Exploring the Library

[2] Reference to Mencius chapter “Gongsun Chou I.”

[3] Sima Qian was the Han dynasty author of Records of the Grand Historian. This quote first appeared in Zheng Mengliang’s 1957 novel Struggles of Sons and Daughters.

[4] An approach to organizing texts that dates to the Xin dynasty.

Chapter 3: A Face Like Jade

[5] An exam-taker who passed the imperial exams’ third, final level with honors.

[6] Government body that drafted official documents.

Chapter 4: A River Serene

[7] “Tao” means “wave.”

Chapter 5: The Words of the Sages

[8] Reference to a Book of Rites passage.

[9] Reference to “Unfettered Wandering” from the Zhuangzi, which describes how the mythical peng can fly thousands of miles in a day.

Chapter 7: Snow in Jinling

[10] Imperial China’s three highest-ranked officials.

Chapter 9: Gratitude for One’s Teacher

[11] Dou means “bean,” but a “zudou” is a dish for sacrificial offerings.

Chapter 13: Seven Fifteen

[12] Both found in the romantic poem “The Peacock Flies Southeast,” by a Jian’an period poet.

[13] From “On the Chariot Flying” by Song dynasty poet Fan Chengda.

Chapter 19: Holding Life and Death

[14] “Jue” pendants are shaped like slightly open rings.

Chapter 22: The Shadows of Flowers and Leaves

[15] From “A Toast” by Tang dynasty poet Li He.

Chapter 23: Moonlit Frost

[16] “Mingyue” (明月) means “bright moon.”

Chapter 24: The Mountain Demon

[17] Slang terms for same-sex couples.

Chapter 28: A Gathering Storm

[18] Famed military strategist from Western Han who forged a giant hammer for use in an assassination.

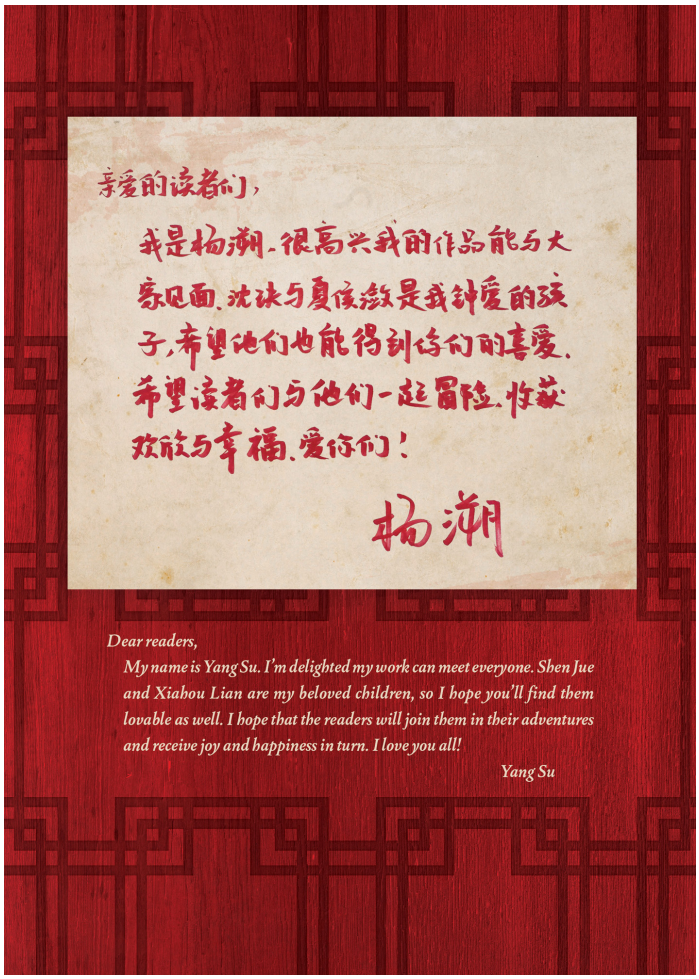
[19] A husband and wife described in the Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue as forging a pair of legendary swords.

Chapter 29: Layers of Sorrow

[20] Reference to Analects chapter “Yan Yuan.”

Chapter 31: Parting Ways

[21] Reference to “Odes of Wei (I): Mu Gua” from the Book of Songs poetry collection.



Dear readers,

My name is Yang Su. I'm delighted my work can meet everyone. Shen Jue and Xiahou Lian are my beloved children, so I hope you'll find them lovable as well. I hope that the readers will join them in their adventures and receive joy and happiness in turn. I love you all!

Yang Su

Bound By Blood
Xiahou Lian, the youngest assassin of the infamous Qiye Garden enclave, has infiltrated the prestigious Xie household on a vague but deadly mission. Posing as a servant under Xie Jinglan, the youngest son of the family, he bides his time, awaiting orders. But as the days pass, an unexpected bond forms between them—mark and assassin alike—throwing a wrench in Xiahou Lian's plans. The decision he makes will land him in dire straits with Qiye Garden while Xie Jinglan walks free.
Two years later, their paths cross again in the imperial palace. Forced to walk a perilous tightrope of secrecy, both boys hide dangerous truths from one another. Something is terribly wrong, and they can both feel it. As one of those secrets spirals into mortal danger, an assassin from Qiye Garden—familiar and fearsome—arrives with an ultimatum that threatens to tear their fragile bond apart.
A TRAGIC PAST AND A DEADLY WORLD OF ASSASSINS SPARK A LOVE THAT DEFIES FATE IN THIS FAN-FAVORITE DANMEI.
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